The Overs

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The Overs

by timely_thunderstorm

Summary

In the summer of 1960 Franklin, Tennessee, enigmatic physician Dr. Michael Robinavitch saves small-town farmhand Dennis Whitaker from heat exhaustion, beginning the most turbulent period of his life.

Notes

Please do not post this story on any other platform, nor in any other format, for any reason.

Chapter 1: What Is There To Say

Chapter Summary

> Enigmatic local physician Dr. Michael "Robby" Robinavitch saves a new resident of small town Franklin, Tennessee from a fit of heat exhaustion.

Chapter Notes

> Welcome to "The Overs" fic! I am not a doctor, but I am trying my very best to do enough research to make some of the... medical... scenes accurate. Each chapter of this story is named after and reflected by a song:
>
> Chapter 1's song is "What Is There To Say" by Chris Connor on Nina Simone's 1959 album, "Nina Simone and Her Friends"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Running from home could only ever be romanticized so diligently before its appeal dulled, and Dennis Whitaker worried he'd suddenly passed *far* beyond that point. His home and his family in Nebraska, though a painfully complicated bridge he'd already burned now, began to appear *almost* like a dream worth scurrying back to, and the kid had only been in Tennessee for a month.

Or perhaps it was just the suffocating, wet summer heat inspiring such second thoughts.

“How long you been workin’ here now, son?”

Dennis did not immediately respond to his boss. He stared at the gruff old man, unsure what the question had to do with his *current* predicament: a splitting headache and warped, blurred vision in his peripheral.

The little room inside the barn was stuffy, and in the hot summer heat, the short-haired, pale boy with tired eyes could feel sweat stifling the space between his itchy farmer overalls and his meatless thighs. As hard as the kid worked, he really couldn’t afford to eat well; he was rather small and parts of his body were kissed pink by the beading, merciless sun.

“About a month,” he swallowed, then hastily added a, “sir,” for polite measure.

Southern hospitality. Dennis Whitaker could muster enough of it to pass around to anyone, though it didn't seem to do him much good in Franklin.

“Right. This farm requires a level of…” the old man searched for the right words in his apparently limited vocabulary, *“work ethic,”* he settled like the words were snake fangs. “A level o’ work ethic that I hope you still got. ‘Cause I don't like my farmers come cryin' to me about feeling ill when they're standin' up on two good feet. Whining about needin’ to go to a — a *doctor*. That kind of talk is for pansies and yankees.” He paused for a moment, gave Dennis a quick scan, then leaned into his desk, big belly pressing into the edge as he declared in a whisper: "And I don't hire fags for farmers, boy."

Dennis' sweaty eyebrow twitched.

“Course not, sir. I—“ the boy rubbed at his dirty forehead vigorously, trying to bury the pain of intense throbbing in his skull, “it ain't serious, you're right. I was just misrememberin' if the job came with any benefits? To cover a short doctor visit after work, or—”

The old man belly-laughed. There was a distinct wheeze in his chest as he did, wet and gravelly.

“Benefits,” he hummed, humored. “Boy, what *'benefits'* did you think came with good ole' Tennessee farm-work?”

It was a satirical question. Dennis knew that. And yet he still willed himself to answer guilelessly:

“I don’t quite remember, sir.”

The boss sighed, resting his hands on the desk in front of him and saying "We don't got no benefits out here. Best I can tell you is to sleep it off tonight. I'll even cut you some slack comin' in a little late tomorrow mornin', hm? How 'bout it?”

Dennis Whitaker would take what he could get.

"Yes sir, Mr. Howell."

"Go on now. Those fields ain't gonna work 'emselves, boy."

Dennis obeyed without so much as a second glance. The boy walked back out into the relentless summer heat, farm boots kicking up dust as he hustled back to his side of the land and mentally prepared himself to spend the next six hours in extreme physical labor while fighting off an admittedly intense and worsening delirium. But that was the power of a pushover; Dennis Whitaker had a kind of special and unspoken willpower. He’d get *anything* done he set his mind to if it meant pleasing someone. Likeliest was that he was something of a coward, but equally, of course, a pushover, and as many of the men around him would argue: a pansy.

“You gonna make it, Whitaker?”

A rough, dirty, almost antagonizing hand patted the boy’s back two firm times and he flinched, whipping his head up to see his farmhand, Randall, looming over him. The shadow he cast upon Dennis was bad news, because he now remembered what it felt like to be out of

the direct assault of the sun; that coolness made him realize just how much he *wasn't* going to make it to the end of his shift without probably dying.

“Mm,” Dennis nodded vigorously through the delirium. “Yeah— yes. Just one of those days,” he lied, pointing up at the offending sun in the sky.

Randall squatted next to Dennis, watching idly as he struggled to work. The heat of the sun now back to beaming on the back of his poor, reddened neck sent him straight back into his stupor.

“Whitaker,” Randall tried with a groan, stopping the boy’s right hand with his own firm grasp. “You look just ’bout keeled over, friend. Go sit under that oak tree you like and daydream about fairies n' flowers and whatnot, hm? Shift's only another hour longer anyway. I can manage alone.”

Randall’s small kindness was a life vest for Dennis, especially given the man's general *unkindness.* He was a bit of an ass. In truth, too, Dennis wouldn’t have taken an opportunity to rest without someone else practically forcing him. Even if it’d killed him. Perhaps Randall's *demanding* nature was the only kind that'd save the boy today.

Dennis nodded, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow but dirtying it with the back of his muddy hand.

“Okay,” he said meekly. “Okay. Thank you.”

As he stood up, the toned, rugged farmhand took his place and went straight to work.

“Don’t get used to this, though. You owe me!” Randall hollered as Dennis began hobbling away. “Susan’s birthday’s comin’ up next month and I need us pullin’ our weight, ‘cause I ain’t missin’ it!”

Dennis dragged himself for ten straight minutes all the way across the vast expanse of farmland, nearing the edge of the green forests surrounding it. A single oak tree stood firm in the open area, and as he walked under the shade cast by the leaves, Dennis shuddered. A moment of silence and coolness; it was the moment he truly processed how far gone he was. His pulse thrummed in his ears, leaving flashes of light pulsing in his peripheral vision as he swallowed.

If it *was* time to die, this wasn’t a terrible spot to lay.

The boy tried leaning his weight onto the trunk of the tree, but his legs gave out, and he crumbled to the ground, rolling onto his back which lay awkwardly on the thick roots protruding from the dirt. A groan escaped Dennis' dry lips, and his eyes traced the flickering, shimmering light of the sun which danced between the fluttering oak leaves. He could hardly discern that light from the flashes surrounding his vision anymore.

"Oh..." he resigned in a hoarse whisper, allowing himself to be swallowed whole by the darkness under his eyelids.

A fitting end for the black sheep of the Whitaker family, he concluded.

Orange light. Warm, grounding light swam through the room from the ceiling like a soft evening sun. Dennis was still on his back. But no longer was he laying on uncomfortable oak tree roots. He was now near-completely submerged in a porcelain tub of cold water. His arms hung out on either side of the tub. His head lay back, hooked on the top edge. Frankly, he was a bit afraid to open his eyes. Had he been kidnapped and harvested for organs, he'd rather not have seen it... better to die in the dark behind his eyelids than die screaming about the holes in his stomach.

Dennis would have stayed that way, too. Would have sat in the cold tub with closed eyes until he bled out, if not for the warm hand that suddenly pressed against his forehead.

He flinched, torn from his thoughts, eyes widening open as he scanned his surroundings.

"Hey, hey, hey... calm down," the man cooed, grasping at both of Dennis' thin biceps to ground him.

"Where am I?"

"You're in my home above the Robinavitch Health Center. I've got you in an ice bath to bring down your temperature. You suffered some pretty nasty heat exhaustion, kid," the man spoke fast and clear, not a single stutter as he yammered on as though he was reciting from a page.

"Who are—"

"I'm Dr. Robinavitch, but you can call me Robby."

Robby allowed a brief silence for Dennis to respond, and they locked eyes. Dennis scanned the man's face. He had scruffy but mostly well-kept facial hair, worn eyes, a distinct nose and short, unkempt brown hair. Likely late thirties. He was a handsome man. There was a glint in his eyes that calmed the kid inexplicably. The man was - embarrassingly, quite immediately - like a beacon in the fog of his mind.

Dennis nodded, reaching his hand out of the water to wipe his eyes.

"I'm gonna," Robby began as he reached over to the sink and grabbed a clipboard, scanning it and continuing, "ask you some simple questions to make sure the sun didn't totally fry you, alright?"

Without skipping a beat, the doctor fired away: "What's your name?"

"Dennis Whitaker," the farmer croaked out.

"How old are you, Mr. Whitaker?"

"Twenty-three since April."

Robby's eyes lit up, "No kidding? I'm an April baby, too. Thirty-nine this year."

Before Dennis could acknowledge that, the doctor continued: "City of residence?"

"Franklin— I can't afford this, sir," Dennis admitted abruptly, interrupting himself.

Robby stopped reciting, looking up and eyeing Dennis in a lull of silence.

"You expect me to have you pay for an ice bath?"

The pale farm boy looked down into the water. He was stripped down to only his white briefs. Tiny cubes of ice bobbed around the surface, but the water had been warming for a while, he'd guess. His cheeks flushed red realizing he was on - nearly - full display.

"Yes, this one," the doctor commented sarcastically, tapping his finger on the edge of the tub.

Robby was personable. That made Dennis feel a little less uncomfortable about the whole situation.

"Well..." Dennis hesitated, fearful of sounding stupid. "I wasn't— I'm not sure how this all works. I just didn't want to accept care I couldn't pay back."

"You're not accepting care you can't pay back. And I don't want your money, Mr. Whitaker," Robby assured kindly. "I hear you're a hardworking kid, hm? Your friend brought you here from Howell Farm. Said he saw you half-dead in the field. Rushed you here as fast as he could."

"Randall?" Dennis inquired.

Robby shrugged. "Dunno. My receptionist - who you'll probably meet before you get out of here - mentioned he dropped you off then said he had to bolt straight back to work."

It was probably Randall.

"Miss Evans said you were redder than a cooked lobster, and... I don't have a *functional* tub downstairs, so we brought you upstairs to my home."

Dennis looked around. It was certainly a regular bathroom. Sink, mirror, toilet, fuzzy brown rug on the otherwise white-tiled floor. The door behind Robby was creaked open, and he could see a bed in the other room. It was a mess.

"Am I gonna be okay?" Dennis asked before his eyes returned to Robby's face.

Robby chuckled at the irrationality of the question, placing the clipboard on the floor and taking a proper seat next to the tub: backside on the floor, knees huddled to his chest.

"You're gonna be alright, Mr. Whitaker, yes. But you..." he contemplated if his next words were appropriate. "You need to take more care of yourself."

Dennis took those words in, pausing in silence for a moment and studying the concern on Robby's face.

"That's a little difficult with bills to pay," he admitted.

Robby knew what Dennis meant, but he still urged: "Can't pay the bills if you're dead."

"Difficult paradox, huh?" Dennis whispered, and Robby's eyes darted to his lips in the most subtle glance possible. Then, Dennis shifted in the tub, saying, "I don't have much money, sir. And I ain't got any family out here. One screw-up would probably cost me everything."

Robby brainstormed in silence for a moment, allowing himself to study Dennis' tired face, gnawing at his own lip as he reached for whatever solutions he could find to help the stranger in his tub.

Here we go, he thought to himself. *Here we go again.*

Robby had a peculiar habit. He saw a stranger's problems and oftentimes he'd totally absorb them. He'd become fixated on solving them like they were his own. It wasn't a sustainable habit, and it certainly was difficult for the man to control.

"You're twenty-three, yes?"

Dennis nodded.

"This world..." Robby tried, grabbing the edge of the tub as he sighed. "It's gonna swallow you up and spit you out a hundred more times before you know how to *really* live in it. But you've got time. Don't push yourself past a finish line that doesn't belong to you."

Dennis was intensely focused on Robby's words, eyes darting back and forth between the man's chapped lips and his brown eyes.

"That is to say, take these things slow. Take them one at a time. Start with *yourself."*

Robby continued searching for solutions, searching for words. After a moment of tense quiet between the two men, he came up with a question he, admittedly, already knew the answer to:

"For example: do you drink much water at work?"

Dennis shook his head.

Robby nodded, then stood up and left the bathroom.

Hollering somewhat theatrically from another room, he said, "I've got something very simple that'll help you with that, Mr. Whitaker! A single, small step toward grabbing the reigns and taking control of your life!"

When he came back, Robby held in his right hand a massive red thermos, the kind that Dennis couldn't dream to afford.

The thought of equating a thermos to *'the first small step toward taking control of your life'* made Dennis want to chuckle, but he didn't want to take away from the moment. It was, after all, an immensely kind gesture.

"Simple solutions to big problems, hm? This-" Robby pointed at the thermos as he leaned back onto his knees at the edge of the tub "-will carry a lot of water. And keep it *cold,* too."

"Sir—"

"You bring this to work with you on hot days like today and I promise you'll be less inclined to drop dead under an oak tree."

The comment finally drew that suspended chuckle from Dennis. That damned chuckle that he'd tried holding down because it didn't feel appropriate. Making light of anything happening. Having been taken care of in a doctor's own home. Having been saved by Randall. Having been given a moment to rest after four long weeks of endless work which had now nearly killed him.

"Sir, I shouldn't take—"

"I'm not letting you leave until you do, to be frank with you, Mr. Whitaker."

They stared at one another in an odd, almost *intimate* sort of stalemate. Dennis' lip twitched. He didn't know what to say. Robby clearly *always* knew what to say, it seemed. He was good at being personable, but that likely just came with the territory of dealing with patients so very often.

Dennis knew vaguely of the Robinavitch Health Center. Randall had mentioned it in passing once or twice at work, saying it was a miracle for the people of Franklin because its doctor was *'urban educated,'* and the place was a lot less formal than a true hospital—a lot more affordable.

"I can't have you being carried back in here cooked medium-well knowing I could've helped to prevent it," Robby continued.

Dennis was quiet.

Robby placed the thermos on the tiled floor next to the tub and reached over, placing his hand over Dennis' forehead. He brushed a strand of the farmer's curled, dirty hair away, flattening his palm and feeling for temperature.

"I'm inclined to discharge you by the time we close this evening," Robby whispered, moving his palm closer to Dennis' hairline, leaning further into his space. "But you got beaten pretty bad by the heat, so I'd rest easier to know you have someone at home to keep an eye on you. Just for a day or two."

"I do," Dennis lied immediately, nodding his head.

Robby's face became... unreadable. Dennis wasn't entirely sure the lie landed.

"Say, Mr. Whitaker," Robby began with a cocked eyebrow, "your folks any good at making meals at home?"

The whole while, Robby couldn't help but notice how thin Dennis was for his age. He suspected the kid hadn't been eating much, at least for a few weeks.

"I don't live with my folks," Dennis corrected softly, "just with a friend. And, yeah," he lied through his teeth, "we make do."

"Got a favorite?"

"What?"

"Food. Got a favorite food?"

Dennis' brows furrowed. "Uh..." he said and looked away from Robby, "can't go wrong with a peanut butter sandwich. Or a pot pie on a good day, I guess."

Skeptical, Robby gnawed at his inner lip for a moment, but nodded. "...I see."

"Why?"

Robby shrugged. "Just making sure you're eating," he spoke honestly, then with a sharp inhale, he took his hand back from Dennis' forehead and stood to his feet.

"I, uh..." he stammered. Dennis noted that it was the first time he didn't seem to have a set of words neatly prepared. "I've gotta go check on Miss Evans downstairs and see what my patients are getting up to."

Dennis chewed on his inner cheek, nodding.

"If the tub gets too cold, step out and dry off," Robby pointed to a neatly folded towel he'd laid for Dennis on the toilet cover. "I've got your clothes in my dryer right now."

Dennis nodded again, quiet as a mouse.

"I'll come back up and check on you as soon as I can."

Robby left Dennis to himself in the silence, but the boy could hear as the doctor stomped down the creaking stairs back to the first floor. Back to the one-story, house-shaped makeshift hospital. He wondered if it was busy down there. Wondered if Robby had gone out of his way to help him or if he was just another patient.

'Just another patient,' he mocked himself, sinking further into the water. He thought it was a stupid thing to dwell on.

It was only as he sunk further that he realized he *was* getting quite cold. The doctor had instructed him to get out if he got *'too'* cold, but what was *'too'* cold? Was shuddering and goosebump-riddled skin enough? He grazed his fingertips along the hairs at the back of his

neck to check if they stood; they did. Was standing hair of the nape cold enough to warrant getting out of the tub? Or should he stay longer to force a regulated body temperature?

Suddenly he wished he'd asked Robby more questions instead of sitting half-naked in awkward silence the whole time. But more intensely, he wished he just knew these things himself. That would've *really* simplified things.

"Robby, we got a nice lady and her son in room C waiting on you," Dana Evans called out as Robby walked past the front desk.

He spun around to face her but continued walking backward as he nodded.

"Been waitin' for nearin' thirty minutes!" She scolded softly.

Robby offered a flippant smirk and nodded again. "I know Dana, I know. Had to get our lobster boy acquainted with my bathroom."

"How's he doin', anyway?"

Robby stopped at the edge of the desk and scanned the appointment log. It was always mostly empty; though his health center was advertised as a general health establishment, he frequently took on emergency and trauma patients, which quickly gave him a reputation in Franklin as... something of a low-cost miracle-worker.

"He's awake. He's..." Robby contemplated his next words with a tight, strained smile: "sweet kid."

Dana offered a humored but confused expression.

"Didn't think I'd see you again before I left, fruitcake," an older woman in her wheelchair rasped from behind Robby.

He sighed and, without turning or diverting his focus from the appointment log, offered: "Miss Myrna... I think we've seen enough of each other for one day, don't you?"

Dana swallowed a laugh that threatened to come out, ducking under the front desk to pretend being busy.

The older woman shrugged and unwrapped the mint in her hand, popping it in her mouth before saying, "I dunno, we could fit in one more round 'fore the ole husband rolls around."

"Jesus, Myrna." Robby pinched the bridge of his nose.

A singular, stifled laugh came from behind the front desk.

Robby turned to face Myrna, leaning his weight on the edge of the front desk and giving her a once-over. The bruise on her right temple was calming down.

He offered, "I'm the biggest advocate of 'em all that you find yourself a nice, kind man, but I'm spoken for!"

Myrna chuckled dryly and shot back, *"You?* Spoken for?"

Robby shrugged and defended half-heartedly: "Anything's possible."

The bruised woman rolled her eyes and wheeled herself toward the front door as she snorted, "Uh-huh."

Robby scurried over and opened the door for her, and she thanked him by muttering, "cocksucker," on her way out.

"Have a good one, Myrna," he offered and let the door shut behind him as Dana peered back up over the front desk.

They exchanged a look, and she pointed down the hall behind her toward room C.

"Go, go, go, champ."

"I'm going, Dana."

As he passed her, Dana handed the doctor a clipboard and sheet with the patient's information on it.

"And while you do that, I'm takin' advantage of the lull," she spoke and pulled a fresh pack of Winston cigarettes from her windbreaker. "I'll be back inside in five!"

"Alright," Robby called out before stopping in front of room C and closing his eyes.

He prayed it wasn't a hassle. Turning the doorknob, he pushed the door open and stepped inside, letting it close softly behind him as he studied the woman and boy sitting at the opposite end of the room.

One quick glance at his sheet, then Robby offered: "Miss Saunders?"

"Theresa is fine," she nodded softly, then looked at her son. "This is David."

"Hello, David," Robby tried, but the teen only gave a single uninterested glance before going back to picking at his nails.

Disrupting the ensuing awkward silence, Robby tapped his pen on the clipboard and spoke: "So, we're concerned about a potential melancholia situation?"

Robby's bedroom wasn't as messy as it had looked from the limited view of the tub. Dennis had dried himself off and willed himself to get up and look around, but only because it had now been nearly an hour since the doctor went downstairs. It sounded busy down there, too.

Against his better judgement, Dennis had wrapped the towel around himself and snooped around the room, landing on a neat array of thick books sitting atop a work desk next to the bed. He'd made himself cozy in the rickety wooden chair and picked a random yellow one, opening to the front page and skimming.

"Principles of Internal Medicine," he muttered, reading aloud.

It was a medical book from 1953. As seconds turned into handfuls of minutes, Dennis drowned himself in the massive walls of text with each turned page, drinking in the kind of knowledge he never imagined he'd be able to afford.

He could read, which was a bit of a step-up in his family, but he certainly couldn't afford many books, let alone the kinds that looked like they were passed around by well-made scholars and doctors and the likes. To anyone else, the book may have been a bore. To Dennis Whitaker, however, it was a treat.

More than a treat, it was a spark. The beginning of a fascination. It was a window through which he could see a better version of himself. Helping people.

His eyes remained fixated mostly on the benefits section for each surgery he read about. What was the surgery for? Who did it help? What was the potential for improved livelihood with those who underwent each procedure? Lots of questions were answered, and Dennis was nearly halfway through the thick book when the sound of creaking stairs ripped him from his focus.

Looking up, he saw that sunlight no longer flooded the windows; it was nighttime. He had no clue how long he'd been reading in Robby's bedroom, but the footsteps coming up the stairs alerted him enough to snap out of it and scurry back to the bathroom.

He kept the towel firmly wrapped around his waist, then sat on the floor just next to the tub, catching his breath and stabling himself from the woozy feeling creeping up his skull.

"Mr. Whitaker?" Robby called.

"In the restroom."

"Do you need privacy?"

"No, I'm decent."

Robby carefully pulled the door open, eyes lighting up ever so subtly when he saw Dennis looking... far better than he had looked several hours prior.

"You look thoroughly cooled off," he leaned on the doorframe, crossing his arms.

Robby looked tired. He'd been running around the house all day.

"I feel a lot better," Dennis nodded, offering a meek smile.

"That's good." A moment of awkward silence. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting so long."

The younger man shook his head, eyebrows raising. "No, it's fine! I didn't mind the quiet. The—well, y'know... the farm is... there's always something going on. It was nice to have a break."

"You don't get breaks when you go home? All swaddled in soft sheets and cool air?"

"My house isn't nice like yours," Dennis chuckled.

Robby nodded sheepishly, scratching the back of his head and pursing his lips.

"Yes, this is a nice home," he agreed awkwardly before pausing. "It's a bit odd, though. Working where you sleep, I mean."

Dennis flinched, staggering to his feet as he realized he should probably leave.

"I shouldn't keep you held up in your own home."

Robby looked confused for a short second. Like he was pondering if something he'd said gave the impression he wanted the younger man out of his house.

"I would've argued you should stay the night at the clinic so we can make sure you're ready to be back on your own two feet," Robby said convincingly.

Dennis shook his head, crossing his arms around his bare chest.

"You've done more than enough for me, sir—*doctor*. I couldn't ask for more."

All he did was drag the kid into an ice bath to keep him away from the grasp of - what could have become - a heatstroke. It didn't seem like all that much, but perhaps, to Dennis Whitaker, it was.

"Well," he sighed, "I can't force you to stay," Robby resigned, clearing the doorway for Dennis to pass by. "Your clothes are dried and folded. Hanging on the banister next to the stairs."

"Thank you," Dennis offered genuinely.

"I'll uh, stay right here. You get yourself dressed. Take your time, go easy."

When Dennis disappeared around the corner beyond, Robby stepped back out into his bedroom, slowly creeping over to his work desk.

Robby huffed with amusement at the sight before him.

On the desk, the fat, old cover of 'Principles of Internal Medicine' was opened to page 36. Robby wasn't sure if Dennis had actually thoroughly read all 36 pages, but the thought of him sneaking around the bedroom and stuffing his nose in these most monotonous of texts was *very* intriguing. Perhaps the kid had an interest in the medical world. Or, perhaps he was only bored—but 36 pages? Robby's interest was piqued.

"Mr. Whitaker?" Robby called out, listening to the movement of fabric as Dennis dressed himself out of view.

"Yes sir?"

"Would you like to pick out a few of these books to take home with you?"

There was an awkward silence, so Robby added:

"Could give you something to pass the time when you're not cooking like a lobster in the sun."

Dennis' small head peered over the corner, and he stepped into view as he finished the last button on his plaid shirt, cheeks red with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Robby's brows knitted in confusion as he studied the younger, shorter man.

"I mean— I'm sorry for snooping around. It ain't my house, I—"

"Pick out some books, would you?" Robby interrupted.

The tiniest pause, then Dennis jumped to action. "Yes sir."

Dennis walked past the doctor, feeling a firm pat on his shoulder.

"There you go," Robby praised.

"How'd you escape Robby, kid?"

Dana's voice came from behind Dennis just before he stepped onto the dirt road. She was leaned back against the front wall of the clinic, cigarette butt between her fingers, a fresh billow of smoke zipping past her lips.

"How do you mean, ma'am?"

"I was aware you'd be stayin' at the clinic overnight for monitoring, is all," she elaborated in that raspy, nurturing voice of hers.

Dennis paused for a moment, realizing he'd lied to Robby and said he had someone at home who'd care for him. It's probably the reason the doctor *didn't* actually force him to stay.

With a faint smile, he explained: "I've got someone at home to make sure I don't... y'know."

"Oh, really?" Dana asked with a sarcastic tone. "What's her name?"

A twitch of Dennis' lips. His brow furrowed, if only just slightly.

The silence lasted a beat too long, and Dana was the one who broke that silence:

"Can't fool a mother, silly."

Dennis resigned his posture. Exhaled the breath that had steeped in his lungs.

"Plus, your friend told me your situation while Robby was haulin' your sunburnt keister up to his house. Ran away from home, livin' alone all the way out here in Franklin. God only knows why you settled on this shithole of all places," she spoke while looking up at the stars, blowing another batch of smoke from her mouth.

"There are worse places to be than here, I think," Dennis offered like a timid mouse.

Dana gave a singular chuckle. "Don't I know it."

"You not from around here either?"

"No, Mr. Whitaker, I'm not." She sighed, closing her eyes and rubbing the bridge of her nose with the cigarette still perched between her fingers. "My husband moved us down here for work a couple years back. Met doctor Robby that same year. We both rolled into town around the same time."

"So where's *he* from? How'd he end up here?" Dennis overstepped, but he was too curious. "Doctor Robinavitch, I mean."

Dana shrugged.

"That isn't my story to tell."

"You don't know?" The question was genuine, but if it had come from any mouth other than Dennis', Dana would've heard it as condescending.

Judging by the look on her face, though, perhaps Dana *didn't* know all that much about it.

"I can tell you he came from a rich little family up north," Dana snorted, "folk around here joke and call him a carpetbagger for that. So he keeps it to himself. But... he cares about people. A lot. Too much. That's all you *need* to know about Robby, really."

Dana looked down from the stars and pointed at the three books crammed between Dennis' waist and his right arm. "You doin' some reading?"

He flinched, then looked down at the books and back up at Dana.

"Oh! Well—yes. I—doctor Robinavitch insisted that I take them. They're from his..." Dennis gestured to the second floor of the clinic, "house. Upstairs."

An unreadable expression settled onto Dana's face, and she chuckled softly to herself, shaking her head.

"Ma'am? Could I ask a favor?"

Dana brushed a stray bang from her face, tucking it behind her ear as she shrugged.

"Depends, I'm not gettin' in trouble, am I?"

"Well... could I trouble you not to tell the doctor about my— my living situation? Being alone, and all. I just... he's done a lot for me already, and I can't afford to pay him back for more care anyway."

The woman looked visibly conflicted for the first time. Like she wanted to argue with him. Like she wanted to lecture him of the importance of listening to a doctor and taking care of oneself. But it took only a handful of seconds before she resigned once more.

"That's *your* secret. Not mine, kid," she reassured in an oddly caring way. It was a foreign thing for Dennis.

"Thank you," he nodded and offered a final glance before turning awkwardly, prepared to head down the road and make the trek back home in the dark.

"Mr. Whitaker," Dana said one last time, and the boy looked back at her over his shoulder. She stared at him with an odd kind of fondness.

"Take care of yourself out there."

Chapter End Notes

Sharing some art here post-upload:

@moontilts made this beautiful art inspired by the fanfic :')

@shroomieeuphemism made this amazing visual comic of chapter 1

moonjunflower drew this stunning concept of Dennis Whitaker in 'The Overs' style (with Robby's sherpa!!)

Chapter 2: The Boxer

Chapter Summary

Dennis struggles to keep his life together in the farm fields as he navigates new interests. Robby and Dana take an unexpected trauma patient late one autumn night.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 2's song is "The Boxer" by Simon & Garfunkel on their 1970 album, "Bridge Over Troubled Water"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Autumn wind fluttered through the open barn door, tickling Dennis' short, dirty hair as he turned the crisp page of his big, red medical book. Randall chowed away at his lunch, but food in mouth did not stop the man from talking:

"I'm thinkin'... a nice pink cake. Whipped frosting, sprinkles, the likes. She's always been a sugar monster," he chuckled, scratching the beard at his neck, kicking a stray rock on the ground.

Dennis was not paying attention. A distracted "Mhm," was all he offered.

Randall looked over at the pale farmhand whose nose lay buried in the book. That sight had become common the last few weeks. Not that - for a scrawny, dorky looking fellow like Dennis - it was entirely surprising that he would read, but Randall could no longer keep track of how often he'd been doing it now.

"What'm I talkin' about, Whitaker?" Randall tested.

"Daughter's birthday," he mumbled back.

"What's my daughter's name?"

A pause from Dennis.

"Cindy—"

"Susan, ya' prick!"

He tossed his dirty shoe at Dennis' feet, and the boy flinched, finally breaking his eyes away from the pages.

Dennis forced himself to laugh with Randall, yelling "Sorry! Sorry," and grabbing the shoe, lazily lugging it back in the other man's direction.

Randall joked, "No party invite for *you* now, ya' turd."

"Dammit," Dennis joked as he marked his page and closed the book.

Lunch break was almost over. He picked up the big thermos Robby had given him and unscrewed the top, taking a greedy swig of cool water. That little gift had gone a long way— it gave him the means to survive the remainder of a hot, humid Tennessee summer when he'd otherwise have melted to a puddle.

"One day you're gonna get a daughter of yer' own and it'll flip your whole world downside *up,* Whitaker." Randall jabbed a finger up at the roof of the barn as he emphasized another, "Downside *up!"*

Not that Randall would ever know, but Dennis knew he probably wouldn't have children. *Why,* he never liked to dwell on for too long. The *'why'* always scared him; it scared him nearly as shitless as having conversations about family. Conversations about spouses. Conversations about a domestic life he knew deep down he'd never be afforded the luxury of living. Not in the way he'd like.

"I'm sure it will," Dennis lied, then stood up and brushed dirt from the ass of his overalls.

"But— if I can have a moment of honesty between men?" Randall asked for permission to speak.

Dennis looked over, then nodded once. He begged to God the conversation was almost over.

"You stay stuck in those books with your cock wettin' the pages, it's gonna be real hard findin' a woman who'll let you wet *her* pages." He stood to his feet, packing his lunchbox back in his sack and tossing it in the corner of the barn. With a hoot, Randall added: "Let alone knock 'er up."

"I don't suppose I'm reading any more than I usually do?"

"Whitaker, you read more words on pages in the last few weeks than I've read in my whole life."

"You know how to read?" Dennis asked.

"Kiss my ass."

Dennis asked with *genuine* curiosity - but it came off sarcastic.

Fall had taken over Franklin, and the surrounding forests of the farm had ignited with vivid, warm color. Crimson reds bled unto sunset oranges; even sour yellow treetops teased the

autumn palette as gracefully as Mother Nature willed. Dennis loved studying the color as he worked. Tennessee was still very new to him; it was his first fall in the state. It was - to Dennis - quite similar to Nebraska... if Nebraska were riddled solely with thick oak forests rather than naked, vast expanses of grassland, rocky hills, and haunting memories.

For having been mostly absent, nose buried in the book during lunch break, Dennis compensated with conversation: "Your wife helpin' any with Susan's party?"

"Ain't got a wife," Randall snorted. "Knocked 'er up, then she let me go. Didn't like how I *'handled myself'* sometimes."

"How do you mean?"

"Said I was *'too angry too often.'* See, that's the thing about a woman, Whitaker." Randall wagged his finger toward Dennis, not unlike a teacher preparing a valuable statement for his student. "She wants you 'till she gots you. Couldn't handle seein' me stressed. Couldn't understand the shit a man's gotta go through, always workin' to keep the lights on at home. I mean... how *could* she?"

An awkward pause.

"Sorry," Dennis offered meekly. "Didn't know you had all that goin' on."

Randall slapped his palm reassuringly onto the back of Dennis' neck and said, "It ain't a thing. Honestly I'm happy we're talkin' like this. Gives me a chance to give you the one-two on women. How to wrangle 'em in and keep 'em when you got 'em."

"Huh," Dennis huffed dryly.

"Y'know, I think I *like* teachin' you this stuff," Randall mused.

Dennis didn't respond to that.

He wasn't fond of Randall's perspective, but it made for decent conversation to kill time on the farm. And since the autumn set in to knock away the heat of summer, his job had become far more tolerable anyway. Working in the farm... Dennis was quick in learning to romanticize it. If nothing else, it was still a survivable escape from the life he'd fled in Nebraska. And the farm had only become more pleasant as the weeks went by - the weeks *after* he'd met Michael Robinavitch.

Every day he'd come into work with one of his three large medical books, his fancy red thermos, and his thin brown jacket. He'd read, clock in, work, ramble with Randall, read for lunch, work, clock out, and head home. Once he was home, he'd keep reading. It was something of a benefit to him, too; he read, so he didn't pay much attention to the growling of his stomach when dinner wasn't on his table. Every night. It helped maintain the facade. It helped maintain Dennis' ability to romanticize it all.

One night in particular, he'd kept his nightstand light on for too long. Nose buried in the red book, eyes strained from reading pages in near-darkness, neck stiff as his back pressed

against the wall at the head of his mattress.

"Simple interrupted suture," he muttered as his eyes tracked the words. "Suture must begin at end point of incision..."

Dennis stayed in that position, entirely losing track of time, reading the page over and over. Fixated on the procedure as though it were a spell of magic, whose contents required undivided attention, unwavering devotion. To learn such a magic required that he stay up until the absurd hours of the morning.

It wasn't until the heavy red book slammed onto the floor next to his bed that he awoke again with a violent jump.

Dennis looked around, eyes straining to open against the bright light of late afternoon.

"Oh..."

He looked over at his clock. It was nearly 4 PM.

"Oh..." he moaned again with utter dread, ripping the sheets from his body and jumping out of bed. "No, no, no."

The pale boy sprinted out the front door of his house with one shoe on, the other snagged and hanging awkwardly from his foot. His overalls were unwashed, and the top button of his jacket just wouldn't lock, despite the relentless effort of his fidgeting hands as he hopped and scurried down the street.

Dust kicked up the cold dirt road with every racing step Dennis Whitaker took toward the farm.

"Incoming, Robby! Twenty-eight year old male with a puncture wound to the right foot," Dana looked down and huffed before turning back to yell, "kitchen knife!"

Robby walked hastily out into the hallway, assessing the man in the wheelchair.

"The food finally fights back," he quipped, taking the clipboard from Dana and reading: "Mr. Stevens, how long has this been in your foot?"

The man winced, grabbing at his ankle with gritted teeth before seething: "Twenty? No, thirty minutes? Give or take. God—It really *fuckin'* hurts."

"I bet," Robby nodded at Dana and stepped behind the wheelchair, hauling the poor man into Room B and parking the chair in the center of the room, closing the door behind him.

"Do you wanna tell me what happened?" He tried as he knelt down, examining the puncture wound carefully with a fresh pair of gloves.

The man winced at the touch, but spoke anyway.

"My girlfriend's daughter... it's her fifth birthday. I wanted to help take the workload off her for the party because the father didn't even show up, but I got carried away and dropped the knife..."

"Where's your girlfriend and the daughter?"

"Told 'em it wasn't a big deal. Told 'em I could get over here, get patched up, and get back to the party before sundown."

"Where were your shoes?"

"Wasn't wearing any."

"That might've saved you a trip to my clinic at all," Robby chuckled.

"Well it ain't a big deal, right? Your place is the best in Franklin, I heard."

"Flattered," Robby spoke as he stood to his feet, opening a cabinet and pulling out medical cloth and a small spray bottle. "Unfortunately, though," he began, kneeling back down and sprayed directly on the wound, listening as the patient groaned at the stinging sensation. "This could be a bit of an issue for you, Mr. Stevens."

"How so?" He spoke with an audible sense of dread.

Robby squinted, spraying more on the wound, then looking up at the man. "Well, y'know... it *depends.* This is a metal puncture wound."

A pause.

"How's your tetanus shot status, Mr. Stevens?"

The man's lip curled downward, fear flooding his eyes as he groaned, "Oh, *fuck me."*

"Right," Robby nodded, assessing the situation further. "I can work a hell of a miracle, but I'm fresh out of tetanus immunizations."

"Am I gonna die?"

"I'd wager not," Robby assured, patting the man's left calf as he wrapped his right hand around the handle of the knife. "But *only* if we get you to a proper hospital that can help with the tricker part of this wound." He paused, then needlessly reiterated: "The tetanus part."

Robby raised the lever of the wheelchair, forcing the foot support outward so the man's foot was elevated.

"Do most people survive a wound like this?" The man still sounded panicked.

"Well... funny enough, there's a statistic floating around in my field. It claims men and women in the south of the United States die more often thanks to complications of tetanus. Can you guess why that is, Mr. Stevens?"

The man shook his head.

Robby pulled the knife out of his foot, drawing a guttural growl from Mr. Stevens as he clutched the handles of the wheelchair with white knuckles.

"It's because men and women in the south don't tend to value the power of a vaccine."

Wasting no time at all, Robby applied intense pressure on the wound of the man's foot, tightly wrapping white cloth around it over and over.

"When a child isn't administered a tetanus shot, they grow up like a sitting duck just waiting for a *single* metal puncture wound. Then begins the complication."

"Fuck..." the man groaned, wincing and trying to stabilize his composure despite the pain in his foot.

"Mr. Stevens," Robby demanded his attention.

The man looked down at Robby.

"Consider talking to your lady about scheduling a vaccine appointment for her daughter, would you?"

"Dana," Robby called out as he rolled Mr. Stevens back into the front lobby.

"Robby," she responded.

"I'm taking Mr. Stevens here to Williamson since we're in a lull. *If* it gets busy, follow protocol. Emergencies get referred to Williamson. General care—"

"—General care to wait here and fill out appointment forms, I got it. I got it. I know this rodeo, cowboy." Dana smirked, leaning into the front desk.

Robby nodded.

"Don't be gone long, though! It'll be dark soon and I ain't runnin' the graveyard shift alone! Got too many ghost stories in my purse to fit another!"

"I'll be back before you know I'm gone, Dana," Robby assured, then hustled Mr. Stevens with his freshly bandaged foot out the front door.

Dana watched until they were out of view, then busied herself with checking off appointment logs and verifying the Tuesday schedule. She fit appointments between free time to account for potential trauma patients, but luckily in Franklin, there were never more than one or two of them any given day. Franklin was a small town, and though it wasn't true of *this* particular small town that everyone knew one another, Dana was confident she could name most residents.

"Where'd my fruitcake go runnin' off to?" Myrna sighed, wheeling herself into the main lobby from the lounge area.

"Haulin' off a poor guy with a knife in his foot. Drivin' him to Williamson for aftercare." Dana groaned. "And hello to you, too, Myrna."

"Better be back soon," Myrna sounded gravelly as usual. "I like his grumpy self."

"Myrna, baby. We discharged you hours ago," Dana spoke and double-checked the log to make sure.

The older woman shrugged. "It's home-y here. Think I've grown to like this place." She looked around as she spoke.

"Wonderful! Can't wait for you to start payin' rent, then."

Myrna offered a deadpan glance at Dana. Dana couldn't help but stare at the bruising on Myrna's eye. As something of a receptionist, Dana knew just about every patient in Robby's clinic - damn near personally, too. Myrna was a frequent visitor, but never for anything life-threatening. She always came in for small cuts and bruises - things that didn't require a visit to a clinic most the time. It became clear to Dana after the first few months of the older woman's increasingly regular visits that she was coming in not as a patient, but as something of a refugee. And how awful a concept that was to Dana: a woman seeking refuge from her own home. Where she came from up North, domestic violence wasn't at all uncommon, but here in the small town of Franklin it felt so very normal. So unsettlingly casual.

"Oh, Myrna..." she sighed, an overwhelming wave of sympathy drowning her comedic disposition. "When are you gonna leave him?"

"Ugh," Myrna waved her hand dismissively. "He ain't so bad. Ain't nobody else gonna take care of me at my ripe age, anyway."

"You call that *'taking care of'?"* Dana asked.

"You don't see him at his best. Takin' care of damaged goods like me. Legs don't work, tits are saggin', teeth are fallin' out."

"A handful of good deeds doesn't make a bad man good, Miss Myrna."

"But a bad man is all I got left."

A pause fell between the two women.

Therein lay the awful reality: it didn't matter what Myrna thought about being beaten on a regular basis. She could not escape it anyway. It was not as simple for her as it could've been for Dana. Myrna did not have the means - financially, physically, and otherwise - to escape the gravity of a bad man. A bad man was like a black hole, sucking in a woman's light and warping it unto nothingness, leaving only the event horizon. A facade of brightness to disguise the truly awful weight underneath. Dana was so very grateful her own husband was not a bad man.

Myrna let out a long sigh and broke that pause with: "Men will be men."

"Bullshit."

The two women exchanged glances— real glances, like they were seeing through the barriers and reading one another. It was rare for Myrna to allow such vulnerability. So for that brief moment, despite the old woman's reality - and despite knowing well that it was inescapable - Dana gave in to her anger. She gave in to the side of her that would've liked to jump straight past the event horizon, deep into the black hole to rescue Myrna from inevitability.

"Fuck 'im," Dana nodded.

Myrna stood still for a moment, not a muscle in her face moved. Then she did something she'd never done in her handful of years visiting the clinic:

She chuckled.

"I'm serious!" Dana defended. "Fuck that son of a bitch. Fuck 'im!"

Myrna calmed her chuckling, rubbing her chest and letting out a wet cough before joking, "Y'think I should just kill 'im?"

Dana sighed, composing herself. Her brow twitched, but she took a moment to craft her response. "I'd turn a blind eye." It was a joke, but Dana thought she might actually be willing to let Myrna get away with it if such an unrealistic thing *really* happened.

"Don't tempt me," Myrna chuckled and shook her head, wheeling herself back down the hallway and toward the rest area.

The corner of Dana's mouth lifted gently, just for a moment. When it straightened back out, she returned to her appointment log and continued down the list.

Then the front door opened.

When Dana looked up, her eyes widened.

"Mr. Whitaker? What the hell happened?"

Dennis wiped pooled, drying blood from the corner of his eye and tried "I'm alright," unconvincingly.

"Come here. Come on, kid. Get over here."

Dana stepped out from the front desk and ushered Dennis to room A. She left the door open, but sat him in a chair and wasted no time cleaning the cut and assessing the wound.

"What happened to you, baby? Don't make me ask a third time."

"It was my fault," he assured quietly, wincing at the touch of Dana's soft fingers on his skin. "I let down my farmhand. Overslept and he had to stay over and take my workload."

"So it was that Randall boy?"

Dennis' lack of response was... confirmation enough for Dana.

"One missed shift and he does *this?* What a prick," she grumbled as she worked.

"It was his daughter's birthday today. He was supposed to leave early to be there, but I... showed up late."

The blonde woman shook her head. "He's lucky this ain't a serious wound. You got a little cut above your eye, but nothin' crazy— he's *lucky."* She pointed aggressively into Dennis' chest as she said it.

"Is Doctor Robinavitch not in? Not— *not* that I mind your care at all! I just figured... I'm guessin' maybe I'll need a suture?"

Dana snorted. *"Suture*, huh? So you been readin' those books he gave you."

Dennis offered a sheepish smile.

"He's not here right now, though, no. Took a puncture-wound patient to Williamson for a tetanus shot."

"Ouch," Dennis winced.

"Yeah— hey. You got your tetanus shot?" She raised a brow at him.

He gulped and nodded nervously. "Yes ma'am. Yeah, my town in Nebraska wasn't keen on vaccines but I managed."

"Good kid," Dana said as she tussled Dennis' hair.

"You don't know if he'll be back today, do you?"

Dana backed away after finishing examining the wound, then responded: "He'll be back, for sure. If you want him to suture you so bad, I'll let you wait out in the lobby. How 'bout that?"

Dennis contemplated for a moment, then timidly nodded.

And he did exactly that; Dennis sat in the lobby for what felt like hours, reading away at that same red book that had gotten him socked in the face earlier that day. His eyes flicked around

each page as he continued making his way through the book. Sometimes he'd reread procedures that fascinated him. Sometimes he'd zone out - eyes still on the page - imagining what he'd look like as a doctor, helping people day in and day out.

When next he took his head out of the pages, Dennis found it was once again dark outside. The clinic was all but empty, save for Dana and himself. Dana had kept to herself all those hours, quiet, but comforting in presence.

"You get so lost in those books," she chuckled, and Dennis turned to look at her.

He offered an awkward laugh and nodded. "It's been a real treat gettin' to... read. To learn, I mean."

"You in school? Shootin' to be a doctor?"

"Oh, goodness, no... no. I'm not— I don't have that kind of money," he scratched the back of his head. "I'm just enjoying what I've got," he said as he raised the book in his hands.

"Nothin' wrong with that," Dana smiled.

The front door swung wide open, grabbing both Dana and Dennis' attention as they laid eyes on a disheveled Robby.

"Dana, I need you to prepare a room. Now." He demanded, and the haste in his voice left no room for questions from Dana, she scurried straight to work.

When his eyes landed on Dennis, he softened ever so subtly for just a split moment, and he walked over, rough hand grazing near the dried cut on the pale man's eyebrow.

"Long time no see, Mr. Whitaker." His voice became noticeably less frantic. It was *soft* now. Low, but soft, and warm. "What happened to you?"

Dennis shook his head, and Robby retracted his hand slowly, fingertips grazing skin, eyes fixated on him.

"I'm alright, it's nothing."

Robby stared for a moment without moving, then finally decided on offering a nod.

"Okay," he spoke soft. "I need to clear the clinic, so you'll have to head home tonight, but..." he put a hand on Dennis' shoulder. "Will you do me a favor, Mr. Whitaker?"

Dennis blinked. Then, meekly, he nodded.

Robby leaned in close, lowering his voice.

"Go upstairs and open my refrigerator. There's a chicken pot pie on the middle shelf, haven't even taken a bite of it. Bring it home with you tonight."

"Sir..."

Robby interrupted the younger man's protest with nothing but a stern look, as though he could just *tell* Dennis hadn't been eating properly for weeks now. The look was strong enough that Dennis decided not to fight it or question it; he simply nodded.

Robby squeezed the younger man's shoulder firmly and said, "Come back and see me sometime."

As Dennis tip-toed up the stairs, Robby made haste to the back of the clinic, exiting from the backdoor and leaving it wide open.

Dana had only just finished preparing the room when Robby busted in with an apparently unconscious young black man in a wheelchair. Following frantically behind Robby was a black woman with soft, brown eyes and a kind of fear on her face that sent a pit into Dana's stomach. The woman's maroon dress was stained crimson with blood.

"Nineteen year-old male, he's got a gunshot wound to the lower right abdomen. It's a deep bullet, very likely hit the iliac artery. Patient is in shock from blood loss. I've barely got him stable. There's a weak pulse—"

Dana's wide-eyed stare didn't go unnoticed. She looked at the woman and then at the man Robby was moving to the bed, stunned. Unable to keep up with Robby's assessment.

"Robby," she shook her head, unsure what to say. "We... can't take—"

Robby turned and spoke with an intimidating sternness: "We will take whoever is in need, *zero* questions. Is that clear?"

"He needs a *real* hospital, we don't have enough—"

"They refused to take him," the bloodied woman sobbed into the back of her hand as she looked away, fighting to keep herself together.

Dana's eyes flicked from the woman back to the man bleeding on the bed.

"Robby, what if someone—"

"We'll figure that out *after* we make sure he doesn't die in this bed, *Dana."* Robby's voice raised as he said her name. "Now get your head back down to Earth and help me!"

Dana composed herself, taking a deep breath in, then preparing to listen for every word that came out of the doctor's mouth from there on.

A weight tugged down on Dennis' chest. His heart found a pace not dissimilar to that of a race horse, hooves thumping in the dirt at incredible speed. He clutched the chicken pot pie against him like hugging a book - as though letting it go would be catastrophic. When he

made it through the creaking, miserable door of his house, it slammed behind him, echoing into the empty, dark night outside. The boy set the pot pie down on his dinky, small dining table, then turned away, pressing his knuckles onto his lips and inhaling sharp.

A chicken pot pie. One that Dr. Robinavitch gave him.

Dennis kept replaying the brief encounter, analyzing. *Overanalyzing.*

He wondered why Robby had rushed him out of the clinic so hastily, and the irrational side of him tried convincing that it was because the man hated him. Perhaps he was a burden. Perhaps there was no tangible reason Michael Robinavitch was so kind to him all those weeks ago when they'd first met. Perhaps he didn't mean it when he'd said "Come back and see me sometime."

Or perhaps it wasn't so complicated at all.

Dennis bit into his knuckle, turning to glance at the pot pie, then turning away again, as though the pot pie were Robby himself. A golden, inviting exterior crust, hiding beneath it layers of creamy chicken, savory vegetables, hearty elements which Dennis himself could hardly refuse.

Afterall, he was starving. He couldn't remember the last time he'd allowed himself a taste of something so harmless - something that *anyone* would eat. But this chicken pot pie felt different. It was not like other foods; it felt like an invitation. It felt like a kind of attraction that should not be indulged - lest it invite a perpetual craving that never fade away; a craving that demanded he indulge more and more, even when he himself could not safely sustain such craving.

But again, Dennis was hungry.

Creeping over to the table and crumbling to his knees, Dennis lay his cheek on the flat surface near the corner, eyes fixated on the edge of the dish which housed the pie. He lifted his hand, pressing his soft digits onto the cold crust, circling and caressing it until the tips of his fingers tingled. His index finger broke the surface, sinking in and feeling the cool, wet insides of the pie. He swirled the finger around, then fit another finger into the same hole. It sounded wet; the contrasting silence around him made it easy to hear each and every squish and squelch from the pie as he moved around inside it.

When he retracted his hand, Dennis slipped his index and middle finger into his mouth, wrapping his lips around them, closing his eyes, and sucking the savory insides of the pot pie clean off.

It was the taste that fueled the hunger.

Frantically, he scurried to his feet, plopping into the light-brown, faded wooden chair at the dining table, digging into the pie barbarically with his hands, stuffing himself faster than he could swallow. Each glob tasted like heaven - he didn't care that it was cold. Food was food, and Dennis was starved.

He did not stop until the little red pot was empty - stomach full, hands coated. Dennis stared at the empty space where pie had just been, eyes tracing the little flickers of lamp light that reflected from the shiny, smooth bottom of the pot. At some point between ravenous bites, the blood in his body had rushed downward, warming and pooling at his groin - he hadn't noticed until all was silent again, no more pie left to occupy him.

It felt - to Dennis Whitaker, a young man who'd prided himself on not indulging crude thoughts or sinful temptations - *very, very dangerous.*

"But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people." Dennis cited, head hung low over the table. "These are improper for God's holy people," he repeated.

The irony of having run away from home in Nebraska to escape the pressures of religious expectation, then settling into a desolate, empty house only to mumble sweet biblical nothings into an empty pot pie bowl; that was an irony that was lost on Dennis Whitaker. In fairness, he was truly far more focused on keeping his hands out of his pants - keeping from relieving the tight, agonizing heat just below his waist. He needed to get up, needed to move. He needed to clear himself of the thoughts trying to creep into his mind.

So he shoved himself to his feet, stripped bare, and ran to the bathroom.

Dennis rubbed at the soft skin of his neck where Robby had squeezed. The shower water was lukewarm at best, but that singular point on his skin felt lit ablaze. It tingled. It was a touch that he craved so desperately for so long now.

As desperation festered and mutated in his mind, Dennis' hand slipped lower and lower, past his chest, down his abdomen, stopping and resting at his inner thigh.

'Come back and see me sometime,' Robby had said.

By this point, his brain was fogged over like frost creeping around a four-pane window. Dennis gave in to whatever affection he craved. He caved as the echo of Robby's voice tickled his ears, as the ghost of his touch grazed his skin. He supposed - in his fit of lust - that just this once, it wouldn't be the end of the world if he closed his eyes and allowed the feeling to fill him. There was, however, a tiny voice buried in the back of Dennis' head reminding him of how disgusted with himself he'd be when he finished.

The pale man wrapped desperate fingers around his aching cock. A soft, light sigh escaped his lips as water from the shower trickled down his face and down the corners of his shyly parted lips.

He'd regret it. He knew he'd regret touching himself the moment this was over. He'd surely regret having done it with the face of a man in his mind. The voice of a man. The rough hands that had touched him not of sexual desire, but of common contact. Dennis would feel dirty for this. He would beat himself half to death for it or find some way to punish himself for his sins; it's what he always did, in place of his father.

Back home in Nebraska, any behavior short of being a man was grounds for punishment. A belt to the face, a stick to the wrist - sometimes a good old-fashioned knuckle to the jaw. Dennis had felt it all, given how often he was behaving outside the bounds of "how a man needs to." When finally he moved away, the void of anger left by his father was one that Dennis now inflicted upon himself. Sometimes he'd scold himself, or other times he'd bite down on his lip 'till it bled. He'd even occasionally hold off eating, deeming himself unworthy of what little food he possessed when he did not work hard enough or act man enough. All of this was simply the shadow left by his father.

So, for having given in to a pleasure as unbecoming as this; having wrapped his hands around himself and done so with the image of Michael Robinavitch stinging behind his squeezed eyelids, Dennis decided he would find suitable punishment. He'd find a way to make himself regret doing this. He'd find a pain strong enough to convince he never do it again.

But only *after* he'd allowed just this one taste of what he knew he could not have.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! As I mentioned previously, this story will delve into bigotry, including that of racism, sexism, and homophobia in the 1960s. I've been doing extensive research on these subjects (especially those that I have not & cannot personally experience) so that my story may stay honest and accurately reflective of the times while maintaining the dignity of these characters, but I am keeping my eyes and ears ESPECIALLY open to input on these issues as the story unfolds. That is to say: I really appreciate any guidance and educational commentary on these sensitive areas of my story, regardless of how confident I am in the research I'm doing for them.

Anyway, thank you for reading, and chapters will to continue to update on a relatively weekly basis. But I won't sacrifice quality for timeliness, so... it might be a little wonky some weeks.

-

Post-upload art sharing:

@moontilts drew this amazing art of *THE* pot pie scene!

Chapter 3: To Be Alone With You

Chapter Summary

> Dennis faces the consequences of his actions. Robby, unable to turn a blind eye, struggles with a difficult decision.

Chapter Notes

> Chapter 3's song is "To Be Alone With You" by Sufjan Stevens on his 2004 album, "Seven Swans"
>
> Welcome to the final chapter of Act 1!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sexual urges were not an easy maze for Dennis Whitaker to navigate.

Naturally, he did *not* sleep well that night.

The walk to work that next morning was just as haunting as the breathless minute that had followed relieving himself in the shower. Terrifyingly, it was a morning swallowed by a kind of silence that left him to his thoughts, or rather: it left his thoughts to swarm around him like a black blur of crows nipping at his skin. How *offensive,* having given in to such vile urges while imagining the face of a man as kind and unassuming as Michael Robinav—

"Hell," he groaned, rubbing his face vigorously as he walked.

His ears burned red like a kiss from the sun.

When he finally stepped into Mr. Howell's dinky little outpost at the edge of the fields, he'd composed himself just barely enough to appear presentable. He stood in line behind four other farmhands for a handful of minutes before making it to the front, just across the desk from the large, old boss.

"Dennis Whitaker," the man hummed low like gravel to himself as he wrote the boy's name in. "Clocked in at," he checked his watch, then wrote more, "9 AM... on... the... dot."

Mr. Howell didn't look up to offer Dennis a final glance, just flipped the page of the farmhand log and continued.

"Whitaker, you're with Randall on the northeast field today."

"Randall?"

Mr. Howell looked up. He hadn't expected a word from the boy. That glance alone nearly made Dennis flinch, and his posture visibly melted.

"Sorry sir— I only... he and I didn't get on too well yesterday."

"Can y'blame him, boy?"

Dennis paused.

"No sir."

"Get out there an' kiss him some ass. It'd do you both good. You *owe* him for what you pulled yesterday."

The young man was nothing if not a pleaser. He did exactly as instructed, clinging around Randall for the whole morning in utter silence, fearful of what else the man might do to him should he overstay his - admittedly already overstayed - welcome.

"To be clear, Robby—"

Robby shook his head and chuckled dismissively as he stepped behind the front desk, setting down papers and checking the appointment log for the day ahead.

"Oh, oh. Oh *wow,"* Dana scoffed and folded her arms, nodding. Watching as he blatantly ignored her. "Sure— act like I'm not even here. God forbid a woman have somethin' to say about your choices!"

Robby stood up and placed both hands on either of Dana's shoulders.

"Dana."

"Robinavitch."

The full name sent a twitch to Robby's eyebrow. She was stressing him out already and he'd only just come downstairs for the morning shift.

"You've tried telling me this same... *same* thing. Fifty times now since last night."

Dana huffed and rolled her eyes, *"Fifty?* Really?

"Fifty!"

"You're such an ass."

"I'm serious. I've been counting."

"I'm trying to look out for you, kid!"

Robby scratched his eyebrow with the back of his thumb. "Don't call me *'kid,'* I'm a year your senior."

"I'll call you what I damn well please!"

"Why does everything have to be a tussle?" Robby's voice raised. "Why does everything need to—"

"—Because you brought them *here!"*

Robby paused.

"That man was dying in the *damn* Williamson parking lot, Dana."

"He's not the problem. This is about *you!* It's about you putting yourself in these... these— these *situations.* Where you're taking on all this baggage like you're wannabe Jesus reborn. Like you can save everyone from this *fucked up* country!"

"What are you on about?"

"I'm on about *you."* Dana hissed. "Putting yourself — *and* him *and* his friend — in jeopardy by dragging them here because you simply cannot *help* yourself. What would've happened to them if some redneck had seen them sneaking in or out of the clinic, Robby? Who do you think would've been in more trouble? Hm?"

Robby blinked. He didn't respond, so Dana pressed her point further:

"You? Or them?"

The doctor moved out from behind the front desk, assessing the lobby, then peering down the hallway to make sure it was tidy enough. Dana stood firmly in her spot behind the desk. She didn't move a muscle.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Robby called out from down the hallway.

"How do you mean?" Dana dared to ask, but she was... almost *afraid* of the answer.

"I promised the woman I'd teach her. Last night. Told her I'd teach her medicine. Procedure. How to tend to a wound, how to—"

Incredulously, Dana sighed "Jesus *fuckin'* Christ."

"The world's changing, Dana."

"Not fast enough!" She hollered from behind the desk, leaning down and scribbling in the appointment log.

When Robby walked back into the lobby, he lowered his voice. "There's already a *lot* of buzz about Jim Crow being torn down. Kennedy's campaign looks promising for a lot of folks out here. It won't be long before—"

Dana rolled her eyes, "You think Jim Crow is the root of all racism, Robby? You think it'll disappear the moment those laws are dismantled? Like we're in some kind of fantasy film?"

"I didn't say that. I don't think it'll be easy. I think it'll be a *start,"* he offered. "And in the meantime... I'm going to do what I can with what resources I have. To help people."

"You *promised* me you'd stop nosediving into risky shit like this."

Robby scoffed. "Dana. You knew - you *knew* - why I came down to Franklin. You knew what you signed up for because I *told* you. It's *my* clinic, and I do these things how I see necessary."

"There are *limits,* Robby. There are limits to the things - both inside this clinic and in your fuckin' *life* - that you can control."

"Does that mean we shouldn't be using our resources to help those in need? Does it mean I can't save a man dying in a hospital parking lot? A man who's being refused care from the *only* major hospital within a *two hour* drive of us?"

Dana finally seemed to soften a little.

Robby added quietly: "It was here or a mass grave."

The man's unwavering need to help people always worried Dana, not for anyone but his sake. She cared for Robby almost like a brother. She knew what lengths he'd go to—trying to help people. But she also knew a fair bit about the damage he could deal to others in his reckless pursuit of solution, no matter his intention. She worried for that woman. Worried for the woman's friend, whose life they'd saved just the night prior.

"Her name is Heather Collins," Robby opened up, leaning into the front desk. "She's gonna be safe. We worked out a system over the night—one that I think is promising."

There was an awkward pause of silence, so the doctor continued:

"She's hellbent on turning life around for her family." Robby said and looked into Dana's eyes, "She has this— this... *need.* This need to care for people. Said she couldn't bear going through something like that again—not being able to do anything about it. I could see it in her eyes; she's got that same drive that I had at her age."

Dana's lip quivered, focus wavering.

"Swear to me, Robby."

Robby blinked, processing the emotion in her voice.

"Swear to me you won't fuck this up for her. Or for anyone around her. Do *not* ruin this woman's life trying to be a savior, or so help me God..." she trailed off, head shaking.

Robby took Dana's hand.

"She'll be coming in for about an hour each night. Long past closing. We'll go over some readings, I'll show her the ins and outs of basic medical care, and that'll be it. No risk. Only you and I will ever be aware of this."

Robby paused, then remembered to add:

"I swear."

The whole morning, Randall didn't speak, but neither did Dennis. He likely already knew they'd be assigned to work together for the day. Maybe Howell told Randall when he clocked in. Or maybe Randall was just in pure disbelief that Dennis was anywhere near him after having punched the blood out of his brow the day prior.

They worked in the field for hours in silence. Dirtied hands, mud-smeared jeans, cold sweat dripping down their faces. It was a chilly afternoon in late September and only getting colder now that the sun was beginning to set.

"I've been thinkin' today," Dennis finally spoke.

Silence.

"I didn't know how to— I mean... I could just say sorry over and over, and it wouldn't matter. I shoulda been there. You should've been at your daughter's birthday."

Save for the sounds of Randall chewing away at his packed sandwich, there was only silence. Dennis had hoped lunch break would be a decent time to sit and talk about his screw-up.

"I love her so much."

The words caught Dennis' attention, but not as much as the noise of a choked sob which followed shortly after. He whipped his head up to see Randall, teary-eyed, bagging the remaining few bites of his sandwich and leaning his head back against the wooden board of the barn wall.

"Haven't seen her in almost two years. That's almost *half* her fuckin' life. *Half."*

A tear finally broke away and slipped down his cheek, clearing dirt from it along the way.

"She probably doesn't even know who I am anymore. Gonna grow up and forget her daddy's name. His face. Gonna make memories and see the world without me. Ellie gave me one

chance to do this. To see her. Yesterday was my *one* chance."

A tear threatened to fall from Dennis' eye. He wiped it with the back of his hand, sucked in a breath of air, and heaved out: "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry."

Randall pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. Dennis scurried over and tried comforting the man with a hand on his shoulder.

"Fuck off of me!" Randall pushed Dennis away violently.

The timid boy's eyes went wide. He stood still.

"Fuckin' bastard. Fuck you. *Fuck you!"*

They spent the next two hours of the shift in even more silence. Dennis, although sympathetic at first, had allowed an anger to fester within him. He didn't like being yelled at in such a way. It wouldn't have been the first time a man's unbridled rage had tipped Dennis' own beyond the edge. But this was, in the end, his fault. So he felt he had no choice but to let it go.

When dusk threatened to bleed over the sky and the chill of night nipped at skin, Dennis tried one last time to make amends.

"If there's anything I can do to help..." he trailed off.

Randall stood from the ground, clapping the dirt from his palms and turning to Dennis. He shook his head.

"Y'know somethin', Whitaker?"

Dennis did not respond, but he didn't need to. Randall was going to continue anyway.

"Only reason I didn't walk right off this stale fuckin' farm yesterday to go see my daughter is 'cause if I don't got this job, I don't got *nothin'.* Y'know what that means?"

Dennis swallowed a lump in his throat.

"It means the only reason I ain't..." a vein bulged in his forehead as he contemplated the next words, *"killed you,"* he finally seethed, "is 'cause I *gotta* be here. More than anything. I'm locked in this pit and they put you in it with me. It don't mean we're friends. It means I'm *stuck* here with your pansy ass."

Dennis felt his brow twitch uncontrollably. He'd tried - all day, through the entire shift - to mind his space, and even when he *did* briefly attempt to apologize for what was, in fairness, not the kind of thing that could be remedied with an apology alone, Randall had rejected it. But that wasn't what was now setting Dennis off. No, Randall's rejection alone was not enough to get under the skin of someone like Dennis Whitaker. It was the regurgitation of Mr. Howell's own language, the perpetuation that he - Dennis Whitaker, scrawny farmhand who could read and imagined a future for himself beyond this farm - was a *'pansy.'* It was the idea that, for being unlike Randall—unlike most men, he was under an inescapable scrutiny; every

action begot judgement. For being judged by Randall of all people, after everything he'd run away from in Nebraska, Dennis was finally out of patience.

"You think I wanna be stuck here with you, either?" He said the words so quiet they were hardly audible.

Randall turned slowly, eyeing Dennis.

"What'd you say?"

Dennis grit his teeth, but he didn't immediately respond.

"What'd you say to me, Dennis fuckin' Whitaker?"

"Think about it," Dennis spoke up, stifling a singular hysterical chuckle. "You ramble sun up to sun down about how shitty women are—how hard it is to be *you,* how pansy I am just for readin' a damned book! You can do no wrong and everyone else is beneath you. You think I wanna be here, either?"

"Got any more gripes to get off your chest?" Randall cackled sardonically. "Did'ya *finally* grow a pair of balls?"

Dennis shook his head, disbelief curling the corners of his lips down. He was at his limit.

"Gripes— Gee, Randall... let me think! I've got a *real* big list to pick from."

"Take your time, boy. I know daydreamin's the only thing you ever do. Zoned out, slackin' work, face buried in that damn book you swear's gonna get you off this farm 'cause you're so capable and fancy and the rest of us are just shit-kickers—"

"That's how you see it, hm?" Dennis nodded. "Well... least I can fuckin' read then."

"I've gotten on just fine without. What's your point?"

"'Just fine?' Is that why you lost custody of your daughter?"

The words came out faster than Dennis was thinking. He knew immediately what would come next.

Randall swung hard, slugging his knuckle straight into Dennis' jaw and sending him reeling onto the freshly tilled soil. He landed with a grunt, feeling the hot pulse of pain spread immediately from his jaw to his neck.

"Fuck you, Whitaker."

A spark ignited in Dennis. The pain in his jaw, the soil tickling his nose; he was already falling off the tower, might as well enjoy the view on the way down.

He clasped at soil, squeezing it through his fingertips as he sat on his ass and turned to Randall, practically growling:

"No. Fuck *you.* Fuck—"

Before he could finish the sentence, Randall's boot smashed into his cheek, pressing him hard into the dirt. The boot lifted. A kick that landed into his wrist with a distinct popping noise. White-hot pain. Another kick to his rib, more bursts of pain shocking through his body. Another kick, and a stomp.

At some point, Dennis raised his good arm toward his face, trying pointlessly to block any strike he could as pleas of mercy spilled from his bloodied lips. The kicks and stomps didn't stop for several long seconds, but when they did, the gift of silence did not fall between them like he'd hoped it would. An intense ringing in his ears ruined that. He allowed his eyes to trail up into the night sky, tracing the hot-white stars which twinkled far off in space, losing track of how long he'd be laying there in the dirt as the night got colder.

The day had been busier than expected at the Robinavitch Health Center. The appointment log showed only a handful of scheduled patients sprinkled throughout the day, but a handful *more* of emergency patients had riled up that schedule quite fast. It was nonstop for Robby and Dana. Not that nonstop was abnormal for the two of them; they'd learned to work around such chaotic schedules and learned to work together very well.

"Have you checked on Linda in room D?" The blonde receptionist called out to her doctor as he hasted by.

Robby offered a nod.

"How are the Saunders' doin'? They up and gone already?" She inquired next.

"Prescription form is filled and signed. They'll take it to Franklin Pharmacy and that'll be that," he dismissed.

"Good, good, good," Dana stemmed, tapping the butt of her pen on the corner of her lip. "Did you pass Myrna on your way over here?"

"I did not," Robby shook his head as he ushered a visitor to the women's restroom. "Right down this hall, ma'am."

She nodded and walked toward the restroom door.

When Robby walked back to the front desk, Dana let out a sigh. "Okay. You've got one more scheduled appointment with Mr. Doug Driscoll, then we're on two hours of emergency window and then... done."

"When's Driscoll coming?"

"Uh, should be right about..." she dragged the words out, watching as Mr. Driscoll swung open the front door with impeccable timing. "Now."

"Mr. Driscoll, is it?" Robby extended a hand, and the large man took it, shaking firmly.

"Right. I'm in for heart issues."

"Heart issues, yes..." Robby nodded, guiding Mr. Driscoll further into the clinic. He turned to Dana and asked, "Room A's clear, yes?"

She nodded.

Robby ushered the patient into room A, the closest room to the main lobby, and sat him at the edge of the bed. Clipboard in one hand, pen in the other, he flicked open the arms of his reading glasses and shoved them on his face, scanning the patient info chart.

"So, Mr. Driscoll... tenderness in your left arm... frequent headaches... and more recently, a tingling sensation in your chest at night?"

"Sounds 'bout right. I mentioned to your receptionist lady that it felt like more of an emergency, so I expected y'all to get me in sooner—"

"Miss Evans follows a procedural questionnaire to help us sift through patients who need immediate attention and those who have the luxury of waiting a *little* longer."

Driscoll blinked.

"A heart issue ain't dire?"

Robby bounced his head left once, then right once, "Hm. Well, it could be. I'll have to assess that. But from what I gather with your sheet - and let this be good news - I don't know that we're dealing with anything *immediately* threatening."

Driscoll relaxed a little.

"Right?" Robby offered a professional smile. "But, to be sure we're taking every possible precaution, let me check your—"

From outside the closed door, Robby could hear Dana's voice yell a name.

"Whitaker? Oh my god!"

Her yell was muffled, but he heard the name clearly and she sounded distressed. His mind shut off completely for a second, then rebooted like a computer.

Robby turned to Driscoll and said, "Mr. Driscoll, could you give me a moment?"

Before allowing a response, he stood from his chair and slipped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Halfway through the front door was Dennis Whitaker, arm slung around Dana as she walked him into the clinic. The boy was beaten bad with a bloodied face, cut lip, and dirtier-than-usual brown plaid shirt with jeans. Robby hustled right over, trying to grab Dennis' other arm for support, but the boy yelped. The doctor mentally noted a possible bone break of the left arm.

"Dana, room C, now," Robby directed.

He ran ahead, swinging the door open and clearing the bed, preparing a clipboard and fresh patient log. When Dana walked through the door with Dennis, Robby helped her sit the boy on the bed and leaned him back as he whined.

"Mr. Whitaker, this isn't what I meant by *'come back and see me sometime,'"* Robby joked, but his voice was all concern.

The joke didn't land on Dennis; he was too focused on the pain.

"Go as I go, Miss Evans," Robby commanded, handing Dana the clipboard and a pen.

She nodded, face full of a kind of maternal worry.

"Vital signs," Robby called out.

He placed his index and middle finger on Dennis' dirtied neck, holding for several long seconds and counting silently under his breath.

"Strong pulse. Blood pressure," he whipped around and grabbed the sphygmomanometer, wheeling it to the bed and wrapping it around Dennis' upper right arm.

"118 over 78. Good," he spoke, and Dana wrote on the clipboard.

"Respiratory rate is fine."

Robby cut Dennis' plaid shirt straight down the middle with haste, pulling it apart and examining the chest. As he pressed gently, Dennis dully responded to pain around the ribs.

"No apparent internal bleeding, but head trauma is possible. Multiple contusions to face, chest, and ribs," Robby fired away each observation, and Dana kept up diligently.

Finally, Robby examined Dennis' left arm from top down. It wasn't until he reached Dennis' wrist that the boy began to squirm and whine in pain. The doctor examined closer, but carefully.

"Mr. Whitaker, could you do me a favor? Move the fingers in your left hand for me, okay?"

He certainly tried, but the pain that shot up his arm in doing so was visible on his face, so he stopped.

Robby nodded to himself.

"Probable left wrist fracture, I'll need an x-ray." Robby turned to Dana. "Man the front desk. If I'm not out in ten minutes, do me a favor and send Mr. Driscoll back to the waiting area and clear the room."

Dana nodded, a blonde strand of hair falling over her forehead before she tucked it back behind her ear and headed out of the room. Robby scanned Dennis' records, eyes landing on the section regarding patient allergies - Dennis had none.

Turning back to the battered boy on the bed, Robby spoke softer, "Mr. Whitaker, I'm going to have you take Tylenol with codeine to ease up some of that pain, then we're going to check your wrist. And as payment for my good work, you're gonna tell me what happened, alright?"

Dennis did not respond, but he looked a potent mix of frustrated and tired. A single tear cleared a trail of the dirt and blood down the corner of his eye and past his temple.

Robby's lip twitched seeing that tear. Grit his teeth, even.

"Let me, uh..." he spoke soft, standing to his feet and rubbing his gloved hands together anxiously, "go grab those painkillers."

Stepping out of the room quietly and closing the door as soft as possible, Robby walked on eggshells to the front desk, leaning into it and staring at Dana. They simply stood there for a moment, staring at one another. Then Robby shook his head.

"I don't think he'll tell me what happened," Robby sighed.

Dana offered a sympathetic expression, but chose her words carefully: "You do what you can. At a certain point it's up to the patient, right?"

Robby nodded, but he wasn't truly listening.

"It probably happened on that farm he works at," he mused.

Dana sighed. She could already sense where this was going.

"Robby, what's it to you?"

"I'm his doctor," Robby defended. "I ought to know what the hell happened to him—*who* happened to him."

"And what'll you do with that information besides let it eat away at you?"

"Report it. Report an assault—"

"You and I both know this is a little deeper than that, Robinavitch."

Robby paused. He blinked. He looked up at Dana, who looked back at him with that same stern look a mother would give to her troublesome child. Ironic, given she was a year younger than him.

"I've seen you around him. You care about the kid."

"Is that so bad?"

"Abso-fuckin-lutely *not,"* she clarified enthusiastically. "It's a beautiful thing havin' the capacity to care for people. 'Specially in tryin' times like these. But, y'know, sometimes I worry you let things eat away at you. So I feel like it's *my* duty to keep you on track whenever possible."

Robby resigned, really hearing Dana's words. He offered an understanding nod.

"That is to say— go do your job and don't invite these kinds of things to eat you alive. *If* he decides to tell you his situation... well, bada-bing bada-boom. But otherwise, just doin' your part's enough, Robby. Doin' your part is all you can do."

Robby gave one final nod.

"I'll let it go," he assured.

Dana offered a soft smile. "Just do your part. It's what you taught *me."*

The doctor patted his hands on the desk and pushed away, standing upright again as he inhaled deep.

"Gotta go grab him some painkillers. I'll get the splint ready a little while after. Would you keep an eye on room D for me? Linda's still resting but she should be out of here before closing."

"I got you, doc."

Robby headed back and grabbed the bottle of Tylenol as well as the codeine. He dwelled on Dana's words, trying to mask the foreign frustration he'd felt while staring at Dennis. The boy was bloody, beaten, and trampled on; yet he didn't care to speak at all. Didn't care to mention what had happened. But it didn't matter. Robby couldn't force him to talk. He didn't *want* to force him to speak.

He stepped back out into the hallway with the pills in a small cup. Walked down the hall and gently knocked on door C. After no response, he quietly pushed open the door.

"Mr. Whitaker," Robby tried, but he was unresponsive.

An unexplainable, small bubble of anxiety floated up Robby's chest, leaving a burning, tingling agony which began to spread through his chest. He stepped over with haste, leaning down and hovering his palm just above Dennis' nostrils.

His breathing was normal.

As he stepped back, Robby squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed at his forehead.

That bubble of anxiety was certainly new to him. Anxiety in itself hadn't been a new feeling, but he couldn't recall a time when a patient had ever made him feel a tangible bubble of fear travel up his chest, and all Dennis Whitaker had done was fall asleep. Robby felt silly; he felt like he might be losing his mind—just a little.

When next he awoke, Dennis' eyes fluttered open, welcomed by the harsh fluorescent light just above him. He winced, noticing a distinct pounding in his head. A full-body dullness, like he'd been hit by a tractor. A big one.

Tilting his head, he assessed the room. But more alarmingly, he assessed the man sitting asleep in the chair opposite the room from him, head rested in his palm, propped lazily on the edge of the medicine counter.

It was Dr. Robby.

The pale, beaten young man could feel his heart pick up pace, but he did not move a muscle. He simply scanned the doctor up and down, locking in on his face and taking in the man's features. His tired eyes, already forming wrinkles despite being only thirty-nine. The stubble on his cheeks and chin. His unkempt, short brown hair which matched the color of his brows — even matched the color of his shirt.

Trying to get a more comfortable view from his bed, Dennis tried shifting his weight. The moment he tried flexing his left hand, a shock of hot pain slithered up his arm like a trail of lightning.

"Mercy," he hissed, wincing.

Robby sat straight up, fixing his posture, awake again.

"Mr. Whitaker," he managed to speak, but his voice was low and gravelly like he'd been asleep for a while. "Welcome back."

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, blinking a few times as he adjusted and focused in on Dennis, who still lay on his back, staring right at him.

"Sorry," the bedridden man said softly.

Robby shook his head, explaining immediately: "No, no. I shouldn't be—" *asleep watching over you like this. It's a little inappropriate.* "I came in to give you painkillers, but you were out like a light by the time I got back."

Dennis stared. Silently.

"I'll take 'em if you still—"

"Yes. Yes," Robby shook his head to clear it, standing frantically and grabbing the cup of Tylenol and codeine, as well as a thermos of water, setting them at the table beside the head of the bed. "Let me help you sit up."

He slipped his hand under Dennis' head, lifting gently and using the other hand to prop two pillows just enough that his head was elevated. Robby grabbed the pills. Dennis held out his good hand as the doctor dumped the pills in his palm. He popped them in his mouth, then Robby unscrewed the thermos and offered to help.

"It's just water?" Dennis asked.

Robby snorted. "Correct."

What else would it have been?

The doctor pressed the metal rim of the thermos to Dennis' bottom lip, tilting slowly and allowing the boy to guide the thermos the rest of the way with his right hand. He sucked down several swigs, long after he'd swallowed the pills, too. Swig after swig, Dennis gulped until the thermos was all but empty, then gently pushed it away. Robby set it back down on the table, then took his seat back on the other side of the room, grabbing his clipboard.

"That should help a lot with the pain over the next few hours," he explained. "I also fixed a splint on your wrist. You've got a fracture, but... that's just about the extent of the damage. Your jaw got banged up a bit, same with your chest and your stomach, but those aren't so severe."

Dennis sighed.

"And, how's your head? Any ringing, any unusual sensation, any brain fog? That sort of thing?"

"Just a headache."

Robby nodded.

As silence filled the room, Robby tried desperately to cling to Dana's words. Tried desperately not to give into the urge and pry into what happened to Dennis. *'If he wants to tell you, he will,'* she had said. It shouldn't matter so much to him. Yes, he was the boy's doctor, but at a certain point, one had to practice the art of letting go. The art of understanding what one cannot control. What *could* he control here? Could he force an explanation out of Dennis? And if he did, what — just as Dana had pointed out — good would that do for Robby? He'd report the incident to authorities and as usual in Franklin, nothing would get done. Nothing would change. Perhaps that was just it:

The only thing Robby could control here, in this situation, was what went on in his clinic. The outside world did not exist in here. Just him and his patient. Robby and Dennis.

"Mr. Whitaker?"

Dennis turned his head on the pillow to meet the doctor's eyes.

"Yes?"

"Was it that Randall fella?"

The question burned in the air between them. The room was silent. Dennis was silent.

Silent.

Robby wasn't going to press further.

"Mr. Howell let me go," Dennis broke the silence, trying to redirect the question.

The doctor's brow furrowed.

"Mr. Howell, my boss. The farm owner. He let me go when he brought me here. I was out in the fields for about a half hour before he found me. Said he'd drive me here so I don't die or... anythin' like that. In the car he told me he was lettin' me go. Wasn't gettin' along with Randall anymore and that was burdensome to-"

"Fired you?"

Dennis nodded.

"I apologize if I'm overstepping, Mr. Whitaker but why— *how* does this happen? Randall beats you bad enough you need emergency medical attention while he himself doesn't so much as show up, and *you're* the one walking away without a job? There's gotta be more to this than..." he stopped himself, reeling in his more personal thoughts.

"Well... I don't really *blame* Mr. Howell. I'd go to those lengths for my own son, too."

That made more sense to Robby. Not the *good* kind of sense, of course. But it made sense.

"His son, huh?"

Dennis chewed inside his cheek and nodded.

"Well," Robby chuckled, but it wasn't a humorous chuckle. It was dry. Sarcastic, almost. "Mr. Howell won't much need to worry about firing his son. Police'll do that for him when the kid's behind bars—"

"Please don't. Sir."

Robby blinked. "It's my duty as a doctor to report incidents like these."

"Please."

"Mr. Whitaker, it is my *job.* If you were assaulted, I have to—"

"He has a *daughter.* He did this because he has a daughter and never gets to see her and I screwed it all up for him. He— he's got it bad enough as is." Dennis found a kind of

confidence in that sentence, the kind no one was used to hearing from him. His pleas landed on Robby's ears like cries from an angel.

Robby didn't want to listen to Dennis, especially given he now had a hell of a reason to get the kid some payback for the lickings he'd endured.

"By the time my wrist heals, he'll prob'ly still have *years* to wait before he sees that little girl again. It's a fair enough trade."

"Doesn't sound like the son of a bitch *deserves* a daughter," Robby blurted, not really thinking.

"Probably not," Dennis agreed softly. "But she's everything he's fightin' for."

"...And who are *you* fighting for, Mr. Whitaker?"

"Well," he huffed, looking down at the splint on his wrist. He looked back up at Robby and joked: "Not myself, evidently."

Robby really tried not to chuckle. He wanted to remain serious. He felt he *needed* to be serious. But he'd been learning quickly that Dennis Whitaker had a way of disarming him.

He shook his head as he resigned "damn you," with a faint smile stuck on his face.

As their shared, soft chuckles settled down and silence once again filled the room, Dennis cleared his throat and asked: "Is Miss Evans still here?"

"No, she headed home hours ago."

"Hours? What's the time?"

Robby checked his battered wristwatch.

"About a quarter 'till three."

"In the morning?" Dennis' eyes widened.

Robby nodded.

"What— am I *supposed* to be here so late? Shouldn't you... be done for the day?"

The doctor didn't have a clear answer to that.

He opted to deflect with a half-joke: "Can't have you losing your job *and* your life, Mr. Whitaker. That'd be kicking a dog while he's down, wouldn't it?"

"A fractured wrist?" Dennis chuckled. "This ain't the worst injury I can take."

"Oh-hoh," Robby laughed. "Read all those medical books and now you're doctoring the doctor!"

Dennis' ears flushed red, a sheepish smile creeping over his lips as he tried backing down: "I didn't mean it like that."

Robby knew he didn't mean it like that.

"I'm sorry for keeping you here so late," Dennis apologized sincerely, like it was *his* fault Robby chose to give him medical care.

"Oh hush," Robby waved his hand dismissively.

A brief silence fell over them. Dennis didn't know what else to say. He wanted to apologize more. Wanted to make Robby understand how sorry he truly was for burdening him so consistently, but he felt confident by this point that Robby would just outright tell him to shut up.

It was Robby who finally broke the silence:

"Have you really been reading them? The books."

Dennis nodded excitedly, taking the question as an opportunity to ramble: "They've been keepin' me going these last few weeks. It's a little silly, but back home in Nebraska I had distant family that worked in medicine, and I'd hear about 'em from time to time... they seemed like real heroes to me. My family didn't have much money, though, so we didn't get books like those at home. And I certainly couldn't go to college and get them."

"Life in Nebraska," Robby mused, leaning back in the chair, resting his arms behind his head, and spreading his legs apart to relax. "That's quite a drive away from Franklin."

"Well I took a Greyhound."

"Running from home, right?" Robby asked. It might've been an overstep.

"...Yeah."

Robby wanted to ask *why.* He wanted to ask very badly. He was going to ask; he was just about to ask—

"It's three in the morning, Dr. Robinavitch," Dennis stated tenderly. "I think you should get some proper sleep."

Robby stopped contemplating his intrusive questions. He locked eyes with Dennis, silent for a moment, then he resigned.

"You might be right."

Dennis stayed in that bed for two days straight. Robby came in to talk with him about his life - and how horribly it had been going - every chance he seemed to get. The younger man could tell: the doctor was a very busy man. If it were anyone else, it would've seemed to Dennis as though Robby bit off more than he could chew taking on a job as the sole doctor of a clinic in Middle Tennessee; but this was Michael Robinavitch. For a man under forty, his experience was intimidating, his efficiency unreal. And even as he bounced from room to room over the course of those two long days, caring for patients with all kinds of ailments, he still found time to pop in and fill the seat in Dennis' room. He still found time to get to know the younger man. Being cared for in a clinic - in a clean room without loose nails and warped wooden floorboards, Dennis felt like he could breathe.

But those two days had now passed.

Dana offered a broad, motherly hug, squeezing Dennis gently, careful not to pressure his splinted wrist. "It feels like I'm sendin' you off to war."

Dennis chuckled, eyes darting to Robby, whose own face was painted with a faint little smirk.

"I'm serious!" Dana defended lightheartedly. "Wish the circumstances were *wildly* different, but I really liked havin' you around the clinic these past two shifts."

The young man nodded, willing himself to crack a joke. "I'll be sure to break a finger or two so you two can keep me longer next time."

"No, no, no," Robby chuckled, shaking his head and waving his arms in a cross. "You've done enough to yourself these past few weeks, hm, kid?"

Shrugging, Dennis pushed the joke further. "I *mean*... I think I could top a wrist fracture."

"And when you do, I ain't stickin' around to hear you whine about the pain again, Whitaker!" Dana belly-laughed, pointing an accusatory finger at him. "Damn near drained all the Tylenol in this place just to keep you from cryin' about it!"

"Won't happen again, ma'am," Dennis waved a goodbye as he slipped out the front door of the clinic, held open by Robby.

"Better not," Dana said one last time for good measure - just in case Dennis wasn't actually joking - then waved back to him. "Take care of yourself for me, kid."

Dana and Robby exchanged a glance.

"I'll be back within the hour to shut things down here. If Collins gets here early, have her wait in the back, alright?"

The blonde lady nodded at the doctor, a dutiful expression melting upon her previously lighthearted face.

"Drive safe," she offered, spinning around to get back to the front desk.

The front door of the clinic shut behind Robby, cool night air kissing at his cheeks. Dennis stood patient like a little dog just next to the road, eyeing Robby - averting his gaze frantically when Robby eyed him back.

"Hell," the older man groaned, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his dirty brown jacket as he stepped over to Dennis. "This damn town gets colder every year, it feels like."

Dennis snorted. "Still doesn't beat Nebraskan winters."

Robby nudged the younger man softly with his elbow. "I'm from even farther up North, Mr. Whitaker. You can't beat me in that game."

"Well how'm I supposed to know that? I told you damn-near my life story these past few days," Dennis chuckled. He spoke meekly—jokingly, but he really *did* wish Robby told more about himself. "All I know about you is you're loaded and you're stressed."

Robby burst into a belly laugh.

"That's about all there is to know."

"And... y'don't have to call me 'Mr. Whitaker,'" Dennis timidly nudged the taller man in return.

Robby turned to face him, eyebrow raised.

Elaborating, Dennis said, "You can just call me Dennis. If you want. If— *if* that's..." He didn't know what he was going to say, so he ended with: "yeah."

Cocking his head, Robby hummed: "Well..." and trailed off for only a moment. *"Dennis,"* he tried the name—carefully. "Let's get you home before we both freeze to death, and then—"

And then *what?*

Robby was hit with the weight of reality. There was some unspoken, intimate buzz between the two of them, and he'd nearly fueled it. *'And then I'll tell you all about me,'* he might've said. *'And then I'll come inside your house and we'll talk all about my past,'* he might've also said, had he not stopped himself just then. That wasn't abnormal, though. It wasn't wrong to make a friend like Dennis and open up about your life. It *shouldn't* have been wrong, but it certainly felt like there was more to it than that, so Robby shut off that part of his mind like an RCA television box.

"Then..." Dennis inquired, looking up at Robby with a hint of confusion - but a heaping of juvenile anticipation.

Robby pulled a hand from his pocket, placing it on the back of Dennis' cold neck. The warmth of his palm nearly made the younger man melt. "Let's get you home, Mr. Whitaker."

The drive to the younger man's little house was - surprisingly to Dennis - a bit awkward; Robby's modest Mercury Monterey rumbled and wobbled on the poorly maintained backroads of Franklin. The car itself was stuffy, so Dennis kept the passenger window down

to breathe in the cool night air. Robby - when entirely certain the other wasn't paying attention - would steal quick glances at Dennis, trying to gauge what might've been going through his head. Robby himself had quite a lot going through *his* head; he'd heard so many stories from Dennis over the last two days, and he knew the boy wouldn't be able to maintain his life here in Tennessee without some sort of miraculous intervention. Dennis was poor, and Dennis was injured. He was just let go at his job and likely had no other options but to return to a home in Nebraska that - as far as Robby had learned the last two days - was *most* unwelcoming.

Robby had the means to *be* a miraculous intervention.

"Left turn up ahead," Dennis spoke soft, voice nearly drowned by the whistling wind gushing through the passenger window.

They reached the short dirt driveway to the younger man's house only minutes later. Robby parked the car and hasted out of his seat to open Dennis' door, grabbing his good hand and helping him to his feet. Gently, the older man closed the passenger door, standing awkwardly, not quite sure what else to say. *Keep it professional.*

"Well, Mr. Whitaker," his voice was low and gravelly.

"This is me," Dennis said. He offered an unreadable smile. "Thank you for everything. I... really, I wish you'd let me pay you for your efforts—"

"Quit that talk. If I needed your money I'd have asked for the check hours ago."

"Check," Dennis chuckled. "All I got's a wad of cash I keep under my mattress." He inhaled sharp. "Emergency money."

"Ah," Robby nodded. "Will that wad hold you over 'till you find new work around Franklin?"

Dennis did not immediately respond.

"Dunno. I only managed to get my job at the farm 'cause of a trashed paper advertisement. Found its way to Nebraska somehow. If you can believe it."

"Funny how that works," Robby chuckled, sparing occasional glances at the depressing house behind Dennis. "Funny how *life* works."

"More likely than not... I'll go back home." Dennis looked behind him - at the house he currently called home - then decided to correct himself, turning back to Robby and saying, *"Home,* home."

"Nebraska," Robby spoke like he knew that word was coming—spoken almost like he *dreaded* hearing that word.

"Mhm." Dennis nodded. He spoke soft and shy as he said: "So... y'know. Chances are, I won't be seein' you again. You... sure you don't want the money?"

The older man rolled his eyes.

"I don't want your money, Mr. Whitaker."

Dennis pursed his lips, nodding awkwardly.

"Well," he said, taking a step backward. "Thank you for everything, Dr. Robby."

"Take care of yourself, kid."

When Dennis stepped inside the little house, a sense of emptiness washed through him; there wasn't much left for him in Franklin. Or rather - there was an invisible, horrid force pulling him *back* to Nebraska: the force of financial instability, the force of family and all that's said about how it meant everything. Family did —perhaps— mean everything, because Dennis felt lost without it. Perhaps it wasn't family itself that pulled this aimlessness from his soul, though; he did feel *quite* at home in the clinic.

"Oh," Dennis' brows furrowed as his eyes landed on the sink-washed pot that had held Robby's chicken pot pie. He'd meant to hand it back to the man before they parted. "Shit."

Dennis grabbed it, hasted to the door, swung it open, and... Robby's beige car was already gone.

The night was quiet, the driveway empty. He tapped his fingernails on the edge of the pot as it hung lazily from his good hand, gnawing at his lip, allowing the cool air to chill him to his very bones. He simply stood there, drowning in the emptiness—the silence. But it wasn't all silent; Tennessee was never *truly* silent. Trees whistled like ghosts in the distant darkness. Whippoorwills chirped at one another, back and forth like conversations between night-shifters. Even crickets, as uncommon as it was to see them leaping around, aided the symphony of noise which filled the otherwise deafening quiet of the world around Dennis.

What an odd thing, one's crippling sense of unbelonging having been remedied by the sounds of nature - if only for that moment.

At two in the morning - right on the dot - Dennis was ripped from sleep by the pounding of a hand on his front door. It nearly rattled his whole house, but that wasn't necessarily saying much considering the house was held together by strings and a prayer. He ripped the thin blanket off him and scurried to his feet, flinching when he put too much weight on his splinted wrist.

"Shit," he hissed.

The struggle of shoving clothes on was a bit too big of an ask given he had only one good hand, especially given he had someone knocking on his front door so late in the night. It was likely an emergency, so Dennis opted to forego pants and a shirt entirely. His underwear would suffice. He shuffled to the front window, trying to peer through as three more knocks

pounded like a heartbeat into the door. He couldn't tell who it was, so he decided to chance it. Perhaps it was, in its own way, his form of suicide—opening a door for what could have been a killer.

As the knocks continued, Dennis spoke through the grogginess in his voice. "Alright, alright, I'm—"

As the door swung open, Dr. Robinavitch steeled himself, retracting his hand from the door.

"Dr. Robby?"

"You can come work at the clinic," he declared, apparently very unaware that it was two in the morning. Or perhaps he *was* aware, and simply did not see the insanity of banging on a person's front door at such an hour.

"What?"

"I thought about your situation. I apologize for waking you—*and* your friend."

"My friend?" Dennis squinted, confused.

"You live with a friend, yes?"

Oh, that lie. The one he'd told the day Robby saved him from heat exhaustion so that he could get home without feeling like he owed the man.

"...No," he sighed, the tips of his ears flushing red. "I haven't got any friends, Dr. Robby. Certainly none that I live with."

Robby nodded like he knew Dennis had lied about that, but had simply let him. And, like it wasn't a big deal at all, he continued as normal:

"I'm sorry for being here so late," he was sincere. "I just couldn't chance you leaving Franklin before I at *least* offered."

He seemed to finally notice Dennis' lack of a shirt or pants, because just as his eyes very briefly trailed away from the younger man's face, they bounded *right* back up, unwilling to look down again.

"Offered me a job... at a clinic?" Dennis shook his head. "Sir, I... I really do appreciate the gesture, but I'm," he cleared his throat, wiping the sleep from his eyes. "I'm no good. I'm no doctor, and I *certainly* don't have a degree of any kind, or a—"

"Dana isn't a doctor, either. You don't need to be. I can find work for you. She and I can show you the ropes. It's all rudimentary. Just tracking patient logs, assigning rooms, helping around when necessary..." he drifted off, letting up on his attempt to convince Dennis, who - very visibly - was overwhelmed. "Christ. I apologize, Mr. Whitaker."

The younger man's brow furrowed, but he shook his head. "No, I..." he let the words hang in the air, unspoken.

A hopeful expression flashed Robby's face, but it was well contained.

"You've been reading the books I gave you, haven't you, Mr. Whitaker?"

"I have," he responded timidly.

"Have you got any interest at all in the medical field?"

"Interest," Dennis parroted, like he was analyzing if that was the correct word for whatever he was feeling. "It's more—almost more like a..." he looked up, eyes meeting Robby's for the first time. "I *need* to do something. For others."

An unreadable expression settled on Robby's eyes.

"Workin' on a farm for people who don't give a rat's ass about others," he elaborated. "It just felt empty. I know what choice I made, runnin' from Nebraska. I know I don't have the right to ask for more, but I wouldn't have even *known* what more to ask for. I'd never seen... any of the world outside my home, really. Never thought to imagine it."

Robby stood still, eyes fixated on the shivering younger man standing in the doorway.

"But the *books,"* he huffed, almost like a chuckle. "Those books were like a north star for me these last few weeks. *'Oh wow, there's a whole world of people out there who spent their whole lives researching and helping people and doing right by the world,'* I thought to myself," Dennis spoke.

He spoke with a kind of confidence that Robby hadn't seen from him in the short time he'd known him. It wasn't much, but there was a *clear* confidence on his tongue as he spoke about those damned books.

"But you're not well-off," Robby surmised. "You can't afford to dip into a world like this."

Dennis nodded, the passion deflating. "Right."

"The clinic could be an opportunity for you," Robby lured. "I can't— well, I can't say for certain if it'll be fruitful for you long-term. But I *can* say for certain it'll keep you afloat in Franklin. If... you'd like to stay here."

If he wanted to keep from having to go back to a family that did not want him, was what Robby didn't dare say.

Dennis chewed at his bottom lip, eyes fixated on the whistling grass just beyond Robby's figure. His mind raced. He didn't imagine an opportunity would arise at all after he'd been graced by the chance to work on the farm. Once that welcome had been overstayed, he thought he deserved the outcome. He thought it was as simple as fate. Perhaps God had *meant* for him to be pulled back to Nebraska—to face his father. Perhaps God *wanted* him to overcome the sinful feelings nipping at his loins, to make him a man like his family wanted. Perhaps he shouldn't mettle with whatever plan was laid out for him by whatever laws dictated the world in which he lived. Perhaps he wasn't meant to meet Robby, or to take the

books, or the thermos, or the medical care without compensation. Perhaps he wasn't meant to take the chicken pot pie home and eat it.

But alas, Dennis Whitaker was *hungry.*

He looked up into Robby's warm eyes, nodding shyly as he spoke:

"I'd like to consider it."

Chapter End Notes

I... actually wasn't going to upload this until Sunday, but the TikTok edits I'm making for the fanfic are going viral and people are asking for chapters and it's already been finished so... I WILL FEED THE PEOPLE!

Love you, thank you so much for the support on this fanfic so far. This is the end of act 1. hehe!

Chapter 4: Tomorrow Is My Turn

Chapter Summary

> As his composure begins to falter, Robby shares a vulnerable conversation with Dennis. Days later, Dennis discovers his secret.

Chapter Notes

> Chapter 4's song is "Tomorrow Is My Turn" by Nina Simone on her 1965 album, "I Put A Spell On You"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Freedom Rider in C is stable. Injuries aren't too serious," Robby declared as he passed Dana at the front desk, slapping his clipboard onto the wooden surface and hasting down the hall.

"How 'bout the one in room D?" Dana called out.

Robby turned, but continued walking backward. He shrugged as he spoke. "About to find out. If he gets any worse, though... I'm sending him to Williamson."

Dana whistled. *"That* bad, huh?"

Robby clicked his tongue, an uncertain look settling on his face. Turning again and swinging open the door to room D, he closed it behind him without having responded to Dana.

Dana shook her head, eyes fixated on the door for only a moment too long before returning to her appointment log and going down the list. She stepped out from behind the desk and prepared herself - mentally, of course - for a round of check-ins. Stepping in front of room A, she took a deep breath in, then pressed the door open.

"How ya doin' Mr. Driscoll?" She greeted casually.

"I've been waiting for—"

"You won't be waiting much longer, I promise you," She raised her palm soothingly. "We've got a full house right now, and Dr. Robby's seein' patients by severity. I just wanted to let you know he's *here,* and he's gonna see you as soon as he can."

"A failing heart *is* severe," Mr. Driscoll grumbled. His face was red, contrasting against his pale skin and light hair.

"Okay," Dana huffed, "your heart isn't failing. We've been through this *so* many times now. If anything, this points more toward medical health anxiety, which—"

"I don't care if it takes five *hundred* appointments for you to find out what the fuck is wrong with me—"

As the man spoke, Dana slowly began shutting the door.

From the other side, she hollered into the frame with a facetious smile: "Which is why Dr. Robby's happy to see you when he's done caring for his other patients!"

Dana shifted her feet and stomped over to room B, guarded by a police officer.

"You need help with him?" The man in uniform asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Dana shook her head, rubbing her brow with the back of her hand.

"He's never been any real trouble, officer. Just a loud dog with no bite."

The officer nodded, moving out of the doorway, allowing Dana to gently press it open and peek her head through.

"Myrna, you doin' okay, baby?"

"Time of my life," the old lady remarked.

"Deep breaths," Dana reminded, eyes landing on the handcuff keeping the woman from leaving the bed. "You ain't goin' through this alone."

Myrna didn't respond, but she *did* offer Dana an uncharacteristically soft smile, barely visible as the blonde lady closed the door and returned to the front desk. She wrote on Myrna's patient file: *25th of August, 1961. Patient arrived accompanied by law enforcement. Officer Dwayne Greenhalgh. Sustained blunt trauma to back of skull in domestic altercation.*

She stopped to process the words she was writing on the paper, then sighed.

"Why the long face, Miss Dana?" Dennis Whitaker asked softly as the front door closed behind him. He pulled on the shoulder strap of his small duffel while waddling toward the desk, but made stiff eye contact with the officer standing in front of room B. "And... what's *he* here for?"

"Oh," Dana groaned theatrically, slumping on the surface of the desk as she joked, "just shoot me, kid. Put me out of my *misery!"*

Dennis lugged the duffel from his shoulder, tucking it in the small space behind the desk and pulling out his pens. He chuckled hearing her humorous, dramatic groans.

"If I did, who'd cover the front desk in the mornings?"

Dana snorted. "Would it kill you to wake up before noon?"

The sarcasm was lost on him. "I don't think so," Dennis answered genuinely.

"It's Myrna," Dana said, pointing lazily at the officer with her thumb. "She actually killed the motherfucker."

All capacity for attention in the young man's brain focused laser-sharp on Dana.

"Myrna White killed her husband?" Dennis hissed in a whisper, leaning in close to her.

"Yup," Dana nodded, lips pursed. "And somehow I feel even *worse* for her now. Girl's gonna be locked up 'till she kicks the bucket. No doubt about it."

The young man's eyebrow twitched, and he processed what felt like... mourning, almost. It had now been almost a full year since he took up Robby's offer to work in the office. Naturally, he saw Myrna a lot. *A lot.* Truthfully, she scared him - in the *'creepy old lady hitting on a mid-twenties young man'* - sort of way, but his fear was, nonetheless, palpable. Even so, he'd grown to like her, and she surely liked him, too. Knowing that her suffering, on one front, was over—no more abuse from a man who kept getting away with it, that was a nice feeling. It was just... the feelings *underneath* that. The feelings that reminded Dennis she was going to jail now, probably for the rest of her life. No more Myrna White.

"Gosh..." he sighed, blinking the shock from his eyes and - slowly - coming back down to reality.

"Yeah," Dana nodded. *"Yeah."*

"What's this?" Dennis asked, tapping the pad of his index finger on a wadded patient log resting next to Myrna's own patient log.

"Driscoll's back," the woman elaborated.

"Again? Isn't this the," he counted with his fingers, "fourth time this month?"

"You know how he is. Givin' himself a heart attack about a heart attack that he never actually has."

"Which..." Dennis looked at the four rooms of the clinic.

"He's in A." Dana pointed. "Still waiting for Robby, but he's tied down in C and D with two Freedom Riders that took a beatin' after a crash on the I-65 headin' into Nashville."

"Goodness..." Dennis huffed. It seemed like he was in for a *very* busy day.

"I tell you what," Dana agreed. "Seems like every day it's somethin' new in this country. But anyway, yeah. Robby's jugglin' C and D, Driscoll's in A, Myrna's in B until she's cleared of any potential head *stuff,* and that leaves you with..." she scanned the patient log for the day. "An appointment with Ms. Saunders. An hour from now."

"Ms. Saunders?"

"Real nice lady. Her son—not so much."

Robby stomped out into the main lobby, stopping at the front desk and rubbing his face raw with the palms of his hands. Leaning into the desk, he shook his head and inhaled sharp before speaking.

"Our guy in D needs to get to Williamson. I don't have the resources here to keep him stable."

"Take it up with Whitaker," Dana pointed. "My shift's nearly over, Robby."

Robby met eyes with Dennis, who - per usual - looked like a little mouse, cornered in its cage by the sheer chaos of the clinic.

"Whitaker," the older man almost barked. "I need you to cover the front while I'm gone. I won't be more than twenty minutes because I've got three other patients I'm juggling, but I need you to keep them from losing their marbles having to wait a while longer, can you do that?"

Robby was speaking a mile a minute.

"I— Dana mentioned the guy in D is a *Freedom Rider?"* Dennis asked, but he kept his voice a low whisper so as not to let the cop across the room hear.

Robby rolled his eyes—began nodding repeatedly, like he was losing *his* marbles.

"Yes, yes, yes. Focus, Whitaker. Are you prepared to cover the front for twenty minutes? Can you do that for me?"

"Yes—"

"Thank you." Robby swiveled, stomping back toward the door to room D.

"Is that a good idea, sir?" Dennis asked with a raised voice, but he tried his damned best to sound kind.

The older man stopped and whipped his head back to eye Dennis.

The younger man lost several pounds of confidence when they met eyes, but elaborated anyway. "It's... just, what if they..."

"I don't have a *damn* choice, Whitaker. *Off my ass.* Get to work." The words came out of Robby's mouth like hot fangs—like he was biting Dennis.

Frankly, the young receptionist was taken aback. He'd *certainly* seen Robby in a tizzy before. It wasn't common, but on a particularly busy day without time for breaths, he could lose his composure. This? What he'd just said and *how* he'd said it to Dennis? It was like he was a wild animal defending his food for the winter. Even Dana was at a loss for words, lips parted just a little in shock.

And if Dennis Whitaker thought it couldn't get any more humiliating, Randall *fucking* Howell came crashing through the front door, arm slung around his father's neck, hopping on one foot while the other looked dark and swollen. Dennis only briefly tore his eyes away from the sight to see if Robby was still in the room. Perhaps he'd want to apologize. But he wasn't there; he was already clearing room D. That wasn't so bad, though. Clearly Randall would need the room as soon as possible—would need some very strong painkillers, too.

"Oh, what the *fuck?"* Randall seethed viciously through the pain. "What the fuck is this milquetoast doin' here?" He and his father laid eyes on Dennis like they were seeing a ghost —one they both hated.

Dennis *was,* in a way, a ghost to them; he hadn't seen them since the day Randall's father fired him from the farm nearly a year ago.

Dana stepped out from behind the counter and scooted a wheelchair over to the two men. "Whitaker, come help me with this."

Dennis scurried over, helping Dana to heave the traumatized man into the wheelchair, trying to ignore the fact that it was Randall. The man's father stepped back, not saying a word; he must've been in some form of shock.

"Randall, I need you to tell me what happened, kid. Okay?" Dana ordered, taking place behind the wheelchair and hauling him off without another word to Dennis. She knew not to burden him with caring for the man who'd nearly costed him his life in Franklin that last autumn.

One thing Dennis loved about working at the clinic was that it simply did not matter how quickly time passed. The clock on the wall in the front lobby made it difficult *not* to track, and when he did track it, of course it went by slower. But it didn't matter. He quite enjoyed working in the clinic, even on a day like that one, where all in the span of the first five minutes of walking in for his shift, his boss chewed him out and his old co-worker who'd beaten him half to death barged in, then he spent the next three hours bouncing back and forth between four rooms full of trauma patients and regulars. Dana had stayed to help him deal with Randall and the others until Robby returned. She even stayed a while after that just to give Robby an intense scolding for the way he spoke to Dennis, but she didn't do it until Dennis was outside on his break. She figured it would be a bit belittling for him to hear her do that in his stead.

After Dana left, Robby and Dennis worked without addressing the older man's earlier outburst. They skirted around one other in the hall or in the front lobby, and speaking - even professionally, as required by their work - was stiff and awkward.

The funny thing about time was that it actually, somehow, passed dramatically faster while Dennis was so focused on what might - or might not have - been going through Michael

Robinavitch's head. It was a fun little game he'd learned to play over the last year of his life working at the clinic. Make no mistake, he was whole-heartedly uninclined to act upon or even entertain that lustful spark in his loins he'd felt when he first met Robby, but there always remained a nagging, nipping pull in the back of his mind—a pull that led him toward the older man. Last year in 1960 the pull was simply attraction, was loneliness, was... hunger. But it had mutated now; he was utterly awestruck by Robby's sheer skill, both as a doctor and as a people person, and how could he not be? He'd been watching the man work firsthand for quite some time now.

Those three hours were quiet - relatively speaking - but they were fast. Before he knew it, Dennis was sending Randall - his final patient, thankfully - out for the evening.

"Per Dr. Robby," Dennis recited as he read Randall's finalized chart to the man, who now stood on crutches with a cast over his foot. "Aspirin should be fine enough for the pain in the coming weeks. *If* you need, though, come in and he can consider prescribing codeine. If the inside of your cast gets wet, come back as soon as possible and—"

"Doc already told me all that," Randall interrupted rather rudely. "Just tell me when I can come get it off."

Dennis blinked, inhaled, then continued. "I scheduled you for two Fridays from today, noon sharp. It should be a quick appointment—Dr. Robby just needs to make sure your bones are healing nicely and adjust your plan accordingly. If you start havin' any severe pain, numbness, or blue coloration, you'll need to come back immediately. Same if you notice signs of infection like, uh... abnormal redness, pus, or if you catch a fever."

"Guessin' he can't work any while he's healin'?" Randall's father - and boss - laughed like it was a joke. But having worked for the man, even just for a few weeks, Dennis couldn't be too sure if it was *actually* a joke.

"No, sir. He's lucky it was only a metatarsal base fracture, but that's *still* gonna need time to heal properly. He shouldn't put pressure of any kind on his foot, and if that changes in two weeks, *after* his appointment, we'll let you know."

Randall shot him a look. A look of - dare Dennis assume - gratitude. If that wasn't enough, the man with the cast on his foot gave a subtle little head nod at the young receptionist.

Dennis returned the nod, then looked away—awkwardly.

After Mr. Howell took Randall out, Dennis locked the door behind them, inhaling deep and holding it as he walked back to the front desk. He finished his last duties for the evening while listening to the white noise of Robby shuffling around somewhere in the back of the clinic. When all was done, Dennis slung the strap of his little duffel over his shoulder and stepped over toward the front door.

"Whitaker," Robby said softly, guiding Dennis to turn around by placing a firm hand on the younger's shoulder.

Dennis flinched, but composed himself just as quickly. "Sir?" He cleared his throat and pointed his thumb at the door. "I finished organizing next week's appointment log. I... was just gonna head out for the night."

Robby nodded. His hand was still on Dennis' shoulder; it lingered, warming the skin underneath his plaid shirt. "Of course— yeah."

Their eyes met, and for a moment, they just looked at one another.

"But," Robby broke the silence. "I wanted to offer to teach you a bit tonight—like you've been asking. Some of the, uh..." he found the right words, *"rural basics.* I realize this past year has mostly just been a routine of tossing you the busy work and giving very little room for real growth, so..." he trailed off.

Dennis shook his head. "No, no. I've learned a lot. And being here is keepin' me in Franklin anyway. It's... it's been nice."

The older man rubbed the back of his head with his palm, letting his other hand off of Dennis' shoulder, perching on his own hip. He looked around for a moment, then his warm, brown eyes returned to the younger's as he spoke: "Have you got time tonight? Any early Saturday plans tomorrow?"

The younger, shorter man did not immediately respond, but he blinked. *Then* he nodded, timid as usual. "I've got time."

The older man nodded, and it looked to Dennis like he was trying to fight off a subtle little smile from the corners of his lips.

"Shall we?" Robby gestured to the front door, which confused Dennis.

"Sir?"

"I've got a home visit to run to. I figure this could be a good chance for you to see how to remain resourceful in these parts of the country."

"Is resourcefulness necessary if I..." Dennis began, but what he wanted to say next was pretentious, so he stopped himself.

"If you?" Robby urged.

The younger sighed. "If my long-term goal were to practice in a more... urban setting?"

The doctor hummed, like he was excited to lecture: "Resourcefulness is especially important in a *real* hospital, Whitaker," he taught as he opened the door and held it for Dennis, the two men walking to Robby's car in the warm, nighttime summer air. "What is a doctor's use at all if he can't manage supply as related to his patients' needs?"

Dennis couldn't argue with that, so he let the summertime cicadas speak in his stead, filling the silence between them as Robby opened the passenger door for Dennis, lugging his medical bag in the floorboard at the younger's feet.

"And, pardon if this is a little personal, Whitaker, but," The man began as he slammed his own door shut, turning the car on and pulling onto the rubbly road. "I think this is the first time I've heard you outright admit interest in the medical field beyond working the desk in my clinic. It's... nice to hear."

"I'm sure I've made that clear before," Dennis defended half-heartedly, blinking as he stared out the window and imagined all the times he may or may not have stated his long-term goals to Robby. Or Dana, for that matter.

"I'd gathered you had some sort of interest, what with you reading damn near *every* medical book in my house this past year," Robby chuckled. "But you've never opened up about what that meant to *you."*

"Oh," Dennis sank into his seat, unsure where else to take the discussion.

"So?" Robby inquired.

"What?"

"You want to practice in a big city, hm? That's what you said, yes?"

"Well— yes. I suppose," he admitted. "But it sounds a little silly sayin' that aloud. I think I missed my window for college, and I—"

The older man snorted. "You haven't missed your window for college, kid. There's no such thing. The only thing that could stop such pursuit is time and money, which... admittedly isn't easy to find, but *if* you find the drive..." Robby trailed off.

Dennis looked over at the man. "How'd you find *your* drive?"

Robby's brow furrowed; he debated how to respond. Robby rarely ever opened up - even to Dana, who he'd been working with for years at this point - about his life before Tennessee. But frankly, he'd asked and heard so much about Dennis' upbringing in the past year that it almost felt owed; he felt as though he *owed* a bit of context about who he was to Dennis Whitaker. Not to mention he'd just, earlier in the day, nearly mauled the kid for no good reason and was now trying to make it up to him in whatever way he was capable.

"Whitaker..." he sighed, finally deciding to open up to him a little. "I was born with heavy pockets. Even with it just being my mother and I, it wasn't hard to find the time or the money to do... whatever I wanted to do. It just so happened that the people I met set me on a path to be the kind of man that helps those who can't help themselves."

Dennis sat still and he listened. Robby glanced at him to check he hadn't fallen asleep, then continued as he drove:

"I knew pretty early on what I wanted to do with my life, so I went to school. Did my time. Was taught by a man so brilliant—so *skilled* in his field... you'd think he was from another planet. Spent thousands of hours honing myself for what I thought would be... oh, I don't

know—some kind of, *'You've made it! You're helping people, and that's all she wrote! Work until you retire!'"*

"Is that... not what you found?"

"The second job I took after my residency was up in Nashville. Ascension Saint Elijah Hospital East. Moved all the way down from Pennsylvania to take up the job, and it... shattered every false reality I'd built about the world. About this country."

"Wow, that bad?" the younger's eyebrows raised. "What, um... what was the *first* job you took after residency?"

Robby didn't respond. Instead, he shook his head. Dennis backed down immediately, returning his gaze to the dark forest outside the car window, barely lit by the last flames of the evening setting sun.

"Our, uh," the older man redirected the conversation, "the patient we're visiting tonight is Miss Ella Jones."

"The lady you see once a month?"

"Correct. She's an elderly woman—sweet as pecan pie. Lives with her daughter and - for the most part - gets care from her. I come in to check on her every now and then; I check medication, progression of the ailment, quality of life, etcetera. It's a pretty simple thing most nights when I visit. It'll be good for you to see."

"What ailment?" Dennis asked with something of a juvenile tone.

"Heart failure," Robby nodded. "What we'll do is we'll go in, strike up some conversation and observe her behavior, do a simple physical exam, and then check her medication. She takes chlorothiazide and digitalis nightly—we check to make sure she's doing so as instructed and adjust according to the progression of her ailment."

"Not too complicated," Dennis surmised.

"Not too complicated," Robby agreed, a little smirk pulling at the edge of his lip—he liked when Dennis was confident.

"It's good to see you, Michael," the woman said as she pulled Robby into a hug while Dennis watched, awkward and stiff on the porch, just behind the older man.

"Likewise," Robby offered, then pulled away and gestured to his young mentee. "Dennis, this is Samantha Jones."

The patient's daughter. Dennis was stricken by her beauty. She had long, messy brown hair. Her bangs were held back by a black headband, and she had tired eyes like duffel bags rested on her face, but despite the unkempt exterior, she was the kind of person *anyone* could tell was beautiful.

"Hello," Dennis offered with a sheepish smile. He extended his hand, and she took it, shaking firmly.

"Samantha, this is the most recent addition to my team, Dennis Whitaker," he smiled, gaze bouncing back and forth between the two of them. "If it's alright with you and Miss Ella, I'd like him to shadow me while I visit tonight."

"Long as he don't ask for food," she patted Dennis' shoulder, forcing a small flinch from him. "I hardly made enough dinner for mama and I tonight. I'd honestly forgot you were comin', Michael. Or I'd have made extra."

Robby shook his head and joked, "He and I will eat later. His treat."

The two of them laughed, so Dennis forced a laugh himself, observing the unspoken connection his mentor seemed to have with the woman.

When they settled their rather domestic laughter, Robby cleared his throat and asked, "How's she doing this month, Sam?"

Samantha nodded, a restrained smile on her face. "She's doin' real good this month. Been takin' meds like you asked her to. She's not been in as much pain. Even been gettin' more sleep this past week, too. It's *really* been a good month."

"Oh, come on. I don't believe you!" Robby joked. "You must be hiding her. Let me in. Let me go see Miss Ella."

Samantha giggled, ushering Robby in, who in turn ushered Dennis in front of him with a firm hand on the nape of the younger man's neck. He did not take his warm, large hand off of Dennis' nape until he'd been guided into the living room, where Ella sat in her recliner.

"Ella, you still, kickin', girl?" Robby sat his medical bag on the couch next to the recliner as Ella turned off the box television across the room.

"God doesn't want me yet, baby!" She cheered softly, inviting the man in for a hug with open arms. She groaned and patted his back, saying, "It's good to see you, sweetie."

"I hear you're doing real well this month, hm?" Robby asked, pulling away first.

As Samantha wandered off somewhere else in the house, Dennis took a seat in a chair opposite the recliner, keeping his hands in his lap all polite and timid.

"I'm doin' as good as a woman my age can do. Minus the heart failure," she joked at the end, then glanced at Dennis. "Who's this shy little farmer you dragged into my daughter's house, Robby?"

A surprisingly astute description given Dennis didn't - at least, in his mind - look like much of a farmer anymore.

"This is Dennis Whitaker. I'm doing a little bit of mentoring for him. Do you mind if he hangs around me while I check on you tonight?"

"Do *you?"* She asked, holding back a gravelly laugh.

"Now what's that supposed to mean?" Robby cocked an eyebrow.

"You're a loner! I've never seen you work with anyone but that sweet young woman at the clinic!" Ella slapped Robby's arm playfully. "But don't you go thinkin' I'm judgin'! He's a lucky boy, gettin' to work for such a sharp guy."

Dennis smiled, meeting Robby's eyes as the man turned to meet his and say, "I'm pretty lucky myself. He's a hard worker."

That... felt *pointedly* like an apology for his outburst earlier. Dennis felt his heart flutter a little, using all his might to force down the red flush that threatened to creep onto his cheeks. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek, but kept his smile up.

"Now Miss Ella, I'm gonna ask you my usual questions while Dennis does a simple physical exam. That alright?"

"Go for it, sweetie."

Robby waved Dennis over, and the younger man frantically scurried to the recliner, standing awkwardly.

"Simple physical to start, Whitaker. Pulse, blood pressure, and respiratory rate."

Dennis obeyed, reaching for the medical bag and grabbing the tools needed.

"I heard you slept well last night?" The doctor asked.

"Only woke up once," Ella elaborated. "Usual coughin' fit."

"Ah. So you've been getting better sleep in general this month?"

"Honest to God," she shook her head like she was in disbelief. "Guess our prayers were answered. And at that—who's to say I ain't gonna shake off this old heart issue?"

That wasn't a joke—Dennis dully noted the tone in her voice. He - and certainly Robby, too - knew one could not reverse of the damage dealt by heart failure in advanced cases. But Ella Jones seemed to believe it to be possible. The issue was, Dennis could tell just by spending five minutes in a room with her: Ella Jones' heart unlikely to return to its former glory. But how should one tell a patient something they'd rightfully like not to hear?

"Ella," Robby sighed theatrically, playing like he was offended. "You trying to get rid of me?"

She laughed. "'Course not! You don't need me to be the excuse to come visit! You and Sam still got time to tie a knot!"

It was unfathomable how quickly Dennis and Robby met eyes when she said that. What she'd meant, Dennis had no clue. But clearly it sent some form of shame up Robby's ears, because they flushed red near-instantly. His eyebrow twitched, too; it only did that when something really set him off balance.

"That's all in the past, Miss Ella. She doesn't need the kind of stress I bring," he tried, forcing a shallow laugh and turning away from Dennis.

"Oh, *fooey,"* Ella swatted dismissively. "She still has a big ol' crush on *you,* whenever you're ready to be a gentleman again."

"Mama!" Samantha shouted from somewhere else in the house.

Dennis didn't have the nerve to interrupt this conversation that he so pointedly wished not to hear, but luckily he didn't need the nerve. He had a job to do: "Pulse is normal. Blood pressure is 136 over 84."

"Ah," Robby seemed delighted to refocus the conversation. "Little high, but we've seen much worse, haven't we, Ella? Whitaker, check respirations."

Ella quieted herself to allow Dennis to focus, and after a moment, he gave a thumbs up. "Respirations are normal."

The rest of the house visit went smoothly, all things considered. Dennis didn't quite know what to do with himself whenever it got quiet; his mind raced, wondering what Robby had with Samantha. He wondered what Ella meant, saying things like 'tying the knot' and what Robby himself had meant when responding so weakly. *'That's all in the past,'* was such an oddly unconvincing statement, at least to Dennis.

They finished the visit sooner than Robby anticipated, so he convinced Dennis it'd be a good idea to eat a late dinner out at a diner he liked. In the car, the younger man ripped himself from those thoughts that plagued him, because it shouldn't have mattered what it all meant. The reality of him dwelling on another man's personal affairs felt so far removed from what he'd been focusing on for the last year of his life, he almost burst into a fit of laughter in the passenger seat. How he'd devolved back into the overthinking, timid, *pansy* version of himself in the span of one single house visit was far beyond him—it *baffled* him. It was sheer —

"You're quieter than usual," Robby spoke soft, just barely above the noise of the car as it hummed and rumbled.

Dennis whipped his head to face Robby, blinking as he said, "Huh?"

"I said, 'you're quieter than usual.'" Robby spared a quick glance at the younger man. "You alright?"

He silently nodded, face like a frightened mouse.

"You sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Dennis feigned innocence, like he *knew* what Robby was prodding at.

"I just," the older man kissed his teeth, grip tightening on the steering wheel as he spoke, "didn't get to formally apologize to you. For this afternoon. Yelling at you like that."

Well, that was *not,* in fact, what Dennis thought Robby was prodding at.

"I get it," he tried meekly, sacrificing his own dignity to appease whatever guilt was settled onto Robby.

But Robby would have none of that. He shook his head and sighed. "No, there's nothing to *'get'* about it. It was plain unfair. You work hard and you have a right to speak up when you feel you need to."

"Well, it *was* a stressful day. Probably one of the most stressful yet. From what I gathered, at least."

The Freedom Riders. Myrna. Driscoll's intensely impatient attitude. The multiple emergency patients juggled solely by Robby as Dennis scurried to fill Dana's absence in the evening. It really was one of the most stressful shifts he'd experienced since he was brought on.

"But that isn't an excuse to take it out on someone who is equally - or *more* - affected by that stressful environment," Robby admitted. "I was taught better than that. By a very good man. He'd be ashamed if he saw how I treated you today."

The sudden reference to that man *again*—a man Dennis didn't even know; it was a little odd to him, but he didn't have time to ask about it, because Robby kept going:

"I took you in to work at my clinic because I couldn't help myself. Couldn't bear to imagine not acting when I knew what might be waiting for you back in Nebraska." Robby paused. "I wasn't totally aware I'd taken in such a tough cookie," he glanced at Dennis, who met his eyes.

"I'm not all that special," Dennis tried.

"I politely disagree," the doctor said softly. "I heard you handling that Randall fella' today. You did an excellent job."

Dennis chuckled. "I was just reading off the page."

"Yes. For a while." Robby agreed. "*Then* you convinced his father - the idiot he is - why Randall needs to take this seriously. Used your *own* judgment to convince him."

Resigning and oddly unable to take the compliment, the younger man said, "I just mean, I'm definitely not *you."*

"Well," Robby parked the car at a diner, stepping out and jogging to passenger side, opening Dennis' door and helping him out. "I wouldn't *want* to be me, but that might just be my informed perspective."

It was past midnight now, late enough that even the summer cicadas had stopped buzzing. As the two men walked toward the entrance of the worn-down, late-night diner, a warm breeze tickled Dennis' bangs and ruffled up Robby's own messy, short hair.

They sat down at a booth in the corner. A disheveled, older woman took their orders with the kind of thick, sugary southern hospitality that Robby never totally got used to. Dennis ordered a simple hash, Robby an egg plate with sausage. Before the woman - Mindy - could walk away, the older man said:

"Could I also add a cup of coffee? No milk, please."

She nodded. "Cup o' coffee on the way, baby-doll."

Robby turned forward again and met eyes with Dennis, who looked confused.

"Coffee? It's past midnight."

The older man rubbed his hands together, then palmed his eyes as he groaned, "I've got work to do before I hit the hay. It never ends, Whitaker."

"How does *that* work?" Dennis mustered the confidence to ask, almost as though he was judging Robby's choices.

He stared at the younger man across from him for a moment, trying to find some sort of enlightening answer, but there was none. "It doesn't," he resigned to say. "Not always. Sometimes... I feel like responsibility is pooling around me. Trying to *drown* me."

A statement that vulnerable from Michael Robinavitch's own mouth—Dennis was visibly taken back, even if only for a moment. He quickly reeled himself back in to figure out the right words.

After a brief, awkward silence, Dennis recited: "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." When he finished, he looked up at Robby again, as though he were looking for approval of some kind; or at least a sign that he didn't look stupid.

"You a believer?" Robby's crossed arms and unreadable face were intimidating to Dennis.

The younger man blinked, brows furrowing as he said, "Maybe not as much as I should be. Or... not as much as I *used* to be."

With a reassuring nod of his head, Robby responded: "They say the medical field will do that to you." When Dennis shot him a mildly confused look, he elaborated, "Lots of doctors find it difficult to believe any benevolent God would put people through the kinds of things we see every day."

"Are... *you* a believer?"

There wasn't an immediate response. Robby's eyes tracked the swaying, flickering ceiling light behind Dennis, then he shrugged. "I don't really know anymore, Whitaker. I certainly used to be." He was going to leave it at that, but the ensuing silence felt like unfinished elaboration. So, Robby continued: "When I was a kid, I recited the Shema prayer every single morning with my grandmother. I was a diligent little shit. Grew up holding onto this idea that faith alone could save me from hardship."

"But it can't," Dennis surmised. "Not always."

Robby offered a resigned, hollow smile. "Nope. Not always," he agreed. With a sharp inhale, he deflated into the cushioned booth behind him, saying, "But that's life."

The waitress came back with Robby's coffee - as well as the plates of colorless food - but she was like a muffled white noise to Dennis, who was focused so intensely on the older man's features. He sank into the focus, tuning out the world around him as silence rang in his ears, heartbeat pounding as he studied the man. His tired eyes, his chapped lips, his scruffy beard. His large hands, finger hooked around the handle of the mug as he took his first sip of piping hot coffee.

"You not hungry?" Robby pointed at Dennis' plate, which had - by this point - begun cooling.

He wasn't even going to pretend to know how long he'd been zoned out, staring at the doctor.

"Uh," he stammered, coming back to reality. "I am. Sorry— I'm not usually up so late," he opted to lie.

Robby seemed to have an, *'Oh, duh!'* moment, and he let his fork clatter onto the plate as he said, "I apologize. We'll get you home, let me just get the..." he trailed off as he turned to try and wave down the waitress for the bill.

"No, no, no, it's fine!" Dennis tried frantically, reaching across the table and grabbing Robby's upper arm to yank him back. When the man situated again, he watched as Dennis' face filled red with a hot flush of embarrassment. "You don't have to rush for me," the younger man chuckled nervously.

He was a little surprised that he'd mustered the audacity to reach across a damn table and grab Robby like that.

"Whitaker, if you're tired, it's really no trouble."

Dennis nodded. "I'm not *not* tired. But... I wanna eat." He paused, heavily—*heavily* contemplating adding the last part: "With you." Before any other thought could process, he shoved a full fork of hash into his mouth.

Robby looked up, fork in hand, frozen in motion. After a moment, he moved again, stuffing a bite of egg into his mouth and chewing—slowly.

"How'd you feel about the visit?" He tried to redirect.

Dennis nodded. "It was nice. Good to see how that works. Interestin' to see what a doctor can assess even without, y'know... a big clinic with ready supplies."

"Precisely," the older man tapped his index finger on the glossy wooden table. "And Ella was a sweetheart, tonight. I think she put on a face just for you—usually she's a lot more vocal about, uh..." he chuckled dryly, "Sam and I."

"Ah," the younger man blinked. There was a pause, then: "You two were a thing?"

They met eyes with one another. Another pause.

"Yeah," Robby finally confirmed. "Yeah, we were. For a while. Couple of years ago, when I first relocated to Franklin."

"She was real nice," Dennis complemented.

"Oh yeah. She's a sweet lady," the older man agreed—a little stiffly. "Taught me how to cook," he added.

The two men met eyes again.

"Is she how you got so good at makin' those chicken pot pies?" Dennis chuckled.

The older man pinched the bridge of his nose, unable to hold back a chuckle of his own as he said, "I'd say she's how I got good at cooking in *general.* You saying you like the pot pies?"

"Don't *you?"*

Robby snorted. "Can't eat 'em. So you *do* like 'em?"

"Every single one you've sent me home with!"

"Maybe I should show you the recipe."

Dennis spent the weekend replaying that night in his mind. He was - not by choice, but by a generally tight budget - a bit of a homebody, so he usually spent his weekends this way. At least, he'd been spending them this way since he started working with Robby and Dana at the clinic. He'd have a mostly normal week—busy days and slow days, then always at the end of the week, Robby would mellow out. He'd become more personable; he'd lull Dennis back into that sense of attraction that he could *almost* - but never quite - shake. Every week for a year now, he'd felt that cycle repeat itself. The ebb and flow of lust which pulled him in on Fridays and spat him back out come each new week.

This new week, however, he decided to get ahead of the curve. He'd had such a nice time accompanying Robby to Ella and Samantha Jones' home, and the diner afterward was a

breakthrough in vulnerability between both men. It was - as it always goes with Whitaker - a taste of what he could not have—what he knew he would not have. And a taste always led to a craving.

He woke up before the sun had even risen that next Monday. He scrubbed himself 'till he was nearly red as a tomato in his steaming shower. He dressed himself neatly and packed his duffel for work. He wouldn't even be clocking in for several hours, closer to evening, but wanted to get in the clinic early and catch Robby before the man inevitably succumbed to the stress of his own patients and became distant—hollow.

The walk to the clinic was a little cooler that morning; it may have been August, but the chill of autumn was creeping its way into the air. As Dennis closed the gap between himself and the front door of the clinic, he fished into his pocket for the key. Pushing it into the keyhole of the door and turning until it clicked, he took it out and stuffed it back in his pocket, leaning his weight just far enough into the door that it opened with its signature squeak.

Inside, he heard muffled chatter somewhere far in the back of the clinic. Dennis thought it was a tad early for Dana to be in the clinic already for her shift, but paid it no mind, shuffling quiet as a mouse and setting his duffel behind the front desk before walking past the patient rooms, toward the chatter. The closer he got, the less familiar that feminine voice sounded—the less it sounded like Dana, rather. It sounded like Robby was lecturing, or *teaching*.

When Dennis turned the corner, he saw Robby sitting in the cushy green waiting room chair. Across from him, in the other chair, was Heather Collins. She was a beautiful woman; she wore a cream-colored blouse which sat tucked in a dark green pencil skirt. Her skin was black and the petite cross resting on her chest was gold. It complemented her complexion very well.

Dennis did not know her—had no idea what had transpired last year when Robby saved her friend's life. He *did* know that despite the growing hope of the Civil Rights Movements, black Americans still faced unimaginable dangers, *especially* in the south; as such, he very likely wasn't *meant* to see her here in Robby's clinic.

A shock of fear zapped through Dennis' nervous system when Robby whipped his head up to face him, eyes widening like a deer in headlights; it was an image the young man would never forget. The shame of having walked in on something he surely was not supposed to know about; it washed over him like a tsunami of guilt and fear and embarrassment.

"Whitaker?" The name fell out of Robby's mouth stunned and confused.

Heather stiffened a little in her seat, guard raising as her gaze bounced back and forth between the two men.

"I—" Dennis stammered, stumbling backward. "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

Before he'd even allowed himself to finish the sentence, he was turned around, scurrying for the front desk so he might grab his duffel and leave before he made anything worse. He wasn't sure who that woman was, but it was clear Robby didn't *want* him to know.

"Whitaker!" Robby shouted with an intimidating tone as he bolted past the patient rooms.

"I'm sorry!" His voice shook as he ran for the front door, his duffel not even secured properly on his shoulder.

Just as he opened the front door, Robby's arm reached from behind and clasped over Dennis' own, pulling the door securely shut. He grabbed the younger man's shoulders and turned him around to face one another, back pressing into the door as he looked up at the agitated man.

"Whitaker," Robby demanded his attention. *"Please."*

Please?

The younger man's brows furrowed, fear subsiding as confusion set in. Robby had just said *'please.'*

"Don't report her," the doctor's voice nearly shook.

"Rep—" Dennis stammered, blinking in confusion. *"Report her?"*

Robby was close. Their faces were mere inches apart, and the man's large hands pressed down into Dennis' shoulders. He nodded, grip tightening as he begged: "To the police, Whitaker! I'm asking you to leave this alone."

"I'm not that kind of— I wouldn't report her! I was just gonna come in and lounge in the clinic early this morning, I— I thought you'd be free! I thought it would be a good time to catch you before..." he cut himself off before he said something he'd regret. "Oh— never mind *that!* I didn't mean to upset you—*or* her!"

They stared at one another for a moment.

Robby blinked. Then he sighed, and his hands fell to his sides. He began to realize that Dennis Whitaker was *not,* in fact, going to be a problem. Not that Robby wanted or expected him to be, but one could never be too careful. It was a dangerous country for a lot of good people, and Robby didn't want himself - or Dennis Whitaker, lest he have been trouble - to be the one to screw it all up for Heather Collins.

"Who is he?" Heather leaned against the wall, arms folded to her chest with a raised eyebrow.

Robby whipped his head around, a bit stunned by her lack of self preservation. After a moment, he turned back to Dennis, rubbing his beard to cope with the stress of the situation.

"Whitaker. This is Heather Collins," he gestured to the woman. "Miss Collins, this is Dennis Whitaker. My..." he struggled to find the words, *"unconventional* mentee and receptionist."

Heather's short, beige Hush Puppy heels clacked into the vinyl floor as she walked over, extending a hand. Dennis looked down at the woman's hand nervously, then back up, still unsure if Robby would maul him for acknowledging her.

"Hello," he muttered timidly, taking her hand and giving it a pitiful shake.

"You're all bones, hm?" She noted, giving him a once-over.

"I feed him when he lets me," Robby quipped, a hint of anxiety still floating in his voice.

Robby sat them down in the back room, Dennis in one chair, Heather in the other, just across the table. The doctor himself sat on the floor, legs in a 'V' shape under the table, arms folded to his chest.

"I brought Miss Collins in last year," Robby looked at Dennis. "Around the time I met *you."*

"He saved the life of a friend of mine," Heather elaborated.

Robby nodded, staring into the table as he remembered that stressful day—like it was yesterday.

"Brought her in?" Dennis inquired innocently.

"She's been learning." The doctor looked to the younger man. "I've been teaching her."

Dennis looked at Heather. She was a very guarded woman—had every right to be. She wore a stoic expression, eyes hard to read.

"That's real nice," the young man offered a petite smile. "Have you learned a bunch?"

His utter indifference to the color of her skin didn't go unnoticed. Robby was grateful, but confused. Heather wasn't necessarily convinced of Dennis' innocence, but she let herself soften up a little.

She nodded. "I've learned. And still am."

"Me too," he offered, then nudged his head in Robby's direction as he said, "he teaches me too, I mean."

"So I've heard," she glanced back at Robby, whose eyes were boring holes into Dennis.

"He's told you about me?"

Heather nodded, "A bunch about you. Nice to put a face to a name."

"Hasn't told me much of anything about you," Dennis said innocently.

His apparently harmless ignorance made the woman chuckle. As she did, she quipped, "Can't imagine why."

Dennis picked up what she meant—got real nervous to correct what *he'd* meant as he stammered: "Well— I meant, I get *why.* I just... I didn't know I struck him as a redneck."

Robby sighed unnecessarily loud. "I didn't imagine you were any such thing. But I wasn't gonna risk putting Miss Collins in any danger *whatsoever.* Dana would have my head."

He certainly meant that last part, but more accurately: he would have never forgiven *himself.* It wasn't untrue that Dana played a big role in keeping Heather safe and convincing Robby of the importance in doing so, but that drive still existed self-sustainably within him, too. He'd never overcome the pain of trying to help the woman and inadvertently being her downfall, had he not been careful. And really, he *wasn't* careful this time. After all, he'd given Dennis the means to stumble in on them, he was just lucky the kid wasn't a piece of shit.

"Dana would walk you like a *dog,* boy," Heather chuckled into the back of her hand, laughing harder when Robby swatted dismissively at her from across the table.

"Dana knows?" Dennis asked, a little more *personally* hurt now.

"She was there the night Heather came in," Robby confirmed. "Helped me keep her friend alive long enough to stabilize him."

Dennis nodded, and in that brief moment of silence, the front door clicked open again, barely audible from the room they sat in.

"Speak of the devil," the doctor groaned.

Dana called out as the door shut behind her, "Robby, ya' idiot! Door's not even locked!"

"Cat's out of the bag, Dana!" Robby hollered back, rolling his eyes.

Her footsteps audibly picked up pace, and when she turned the corner to find Dennis sitting in the same room as Heather Collins, she blinked. And blinked again.

Folding her arms and leaning into the wall with her work bag, she sighed.

"Well *howdy,* Whitaker."

Chapter End Notes

Wow, okay! Thank you guys so much for the support you've shown on my fanfic these past few days. I lowkey sabotaged myself because the excitement of it all made me release chapter 3 earlier than I should've, so I am... scurrying to keep up with the weekly upload schedule now. LOL

Just finished a "chapter trailer" for TikTok for this chapter that I'm super excited about, so... here we go! I hope you enjoyed the first chapter of Act 2!

Chapter 5: Emotions

Chapter Summary

Emotions run high as things begin to change around the clinic, and Dennis shares a deep secret with Robby.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 5's song is "Emotions" by Brenda Lee on her 1961 same-titled album, "Emotions"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the next few months, Dennis Whitaker would learn that Heather Collins was put on Earth by God himself to become a doctor.

"Doctor! *Doctor!* My app—" Dennis fisted his plaid shirt right at his naval, wincing in pain. "It hurts!" Balling the shirt's itchy fabric in his white-knuckled fist, he twisted, and writhed in his chair, feet kicking at the floor. "It *hurts!"*

Heather glanced at Robby, then back to Dennis, rolling her eyes—trying not to chuckle.

"Possible appendicitis patient," she declared.

Dennis' face went slack as he sat upright, balled fist falling to his side. He looked disappointed as he said, "How'd you guess it that fast?" He would've liked to act it out a bit further.

"Doesn't help that you nearly said 'appendix' in the middle of your theatrics," Robby snorted.

Theatrics?

"I was just, y'know..." Dennis stammered, the tips of his ears flushing red, "tryin' to set the tone for Miss Collins."

"Y'know, you're right, Mr. Whitaker," Heather nodded, half-heartedly playing along. "I should ask you before I diagnose you: are you feeling nauseous at all? Any negative changes in appetite? Have you got a fever?"

Dennis looked less enthused now that Heather had already guessed his ailment, but he went along anyway. "Yes, ma'am. Fever. Real *bad* fever. And it hurts like a moonshine fistfight

right here just to cough," he pointed at his right lower quadrant.

"What course of action do you take, Miss Collins?" Robby asked.

"We don't have much time - assuming it *is* a case of appendicitis - to act, so..." she set down her notes and crossed one leg over the other in her seat. "We narrow in. Physical examination —we check for sensitivity at McBurney's point."

Robby nodded, then pressed for more: "And..."

"...We could also use the psoas and obturator signs. Determine any pain—"

Robby interrupted, "Let's assume it's a positive psoas sign. What now?"

Dennis focused on Heather, who held a confident expression upon her face. She knew these things like the back of her hand. She'd only been learning for just about as long as Dennis had. And yet, she seemed miles ahead.

"We could perform tests to rule out similar ailments. A urinalysis. White blood cell count, to confirm diagnosis."

"Confirmed. What now?"

"Immediately admit patient for an open appendectomy."

"Walk me through it, doctor."

"Administer general anesthesia, make sure the point of incision is cleaned and shaven."

"Where's the incision?"

"Right lower quadrant, just at the McBurney point."

Heather continued to explain precisely how to perform the appendectomy, and Dennis just sat there - across from her in his own chair - mouth agape as the woman described it so very vividly. So *perfectly.* It was like she was reading right out of the pages, but she wasn't. Her eyes were nowhere near a book or a page; they were fixated like fiery beams of light directly on Robby. The doctor himself didn't look outwardly surprised by her skillful assessment. His arms were folded, and he sat back, relaxed in his chair, the subtlest of nods bouncing his head up and down as he listened to her.

"—and in two weeks, we bring them back to examine and remove stitches. *If* we used non-absorbable, of course."

Robby sat there in silence for a moment, the two of them sharing a look.

"Congratulations, Miss Collins. You just saved a life."

Dennis smiled. Heather smiled. They glanced at one another—she had a look on her face like she couldn't believe she'd just walked through the procedure with such grace. A look on her

face like she was *surprised* she had just impressed the doctor. It was all the more endearing to Dennis, who looked up to her like a God.

It had now been roughly two and a half months since he and Heather Collins met one another; that fateful Monday after his little diner getaway with Doctor Robinavitch. Summer had since passed, and autumn was on its tail end in Franklin; the chill of winter began to creep into the air like a familiar, haunting whisper. They'd gotten into this habit: Dennis staying at the clinic far past closing, Heather coming in during the mid of night to study and work alongside Dennis as the doctor oversaw their progress. It was a routine that had made the young man feel like he had a home—not a house, a *home.* A place he looked forward to returning to every day. A place he dreaded leaving at the end of every day.

"You're up, Whitaker." Robby looked at the young man, nodding.

Heather leaned forward to grab one of her notes from the table, flipping through until she landed on her own scenario, to be given to Whitaker as a quiz of sorts. The young man adjusted his posture, hands clasped together in his lap, ears perked as he awaited whatever ailment Miss Collins had prepared for him.

As she looked up, eyes meeting Dennis', Heather took a deep breath in. She did not immediately speak. The woman's eyes flicked back down to the note in her hands. Dennis could see how the thin paper warped in her grasp, like she was clutching to it tightly—like it might blow away if she wasn't careful.

"Mr. Whitaker," she said, eyes still on the note.

"Miss Collins," he said.

Heather's dark brown eyes finally met his again. "Two patients walk in."

"Two?"

"Two." She inhaled through her nose. "A man and a woman. Married couple. They're coughin' and come up to the front desk real weak-like. You can see their clothes are ill-fitted, but more important; you can see their faces—*thinning* faces, hollow cheeks and the likes."

Dennis' brow twitched. "How long has the cough persisted? Both patients caught this around the same time?"

Heather nodded. "They tell you the wife picked it up first, about a month ago, but no doctor would see her. The man says the same: he picked it up from his wife just a couple of days after—doctor wouldn't see *him,* neither."

"Have they got kids? I'd ask what kind of exposure they might've—"

"They've got three kids. Two boys and an eldest daughter. But they isolated themselves well. The kids are fine."

"How can they be sure—"

"The kids are *fine,"* she pressed.

Dennis hadn't noticed how tense he'd become. He glanced over at Robby, like the sight of the man alone could remind him this was all just a theoretical—that it was all okay.

"Have they, um," he licked his chapped lips, cleared his throat, and returned his eyes to Heather. "Have they been coughin' up blood at all?"

"They tell you *'yes.'* They say blood's been comin' up for a few days now."

Dennis blinked. "TB."

Robby snapped his finger, watching as Dennis whipped his head to face him, almost eager to be corrected: "Full name."

"Tuberculosis," Dennis corrected himself obediently, "would be my initial assumption. I'd need to physically examine them—check for signs. Elevated temperature and respiratory rate. Pulse and blood pressure, too. Then a chest exam."

"There's a good way to confirm it's tuberculosis, Whitaker," Robby guided softly.

Dennis thought for a moment, then let out an enthused *'ah!'* before continuing, "Cavitary lesions. Well— *any* scarring of the lung. With no prior history, the likeliest cause of the scarrin' would almost *have* to be TB, no?" Before Robby could correct him again, Dennis corrected himself: "Tuberculosis."

Heather nodded. "There're a number of scars. And visible cavitary lesions."

"What now, kid?" Robby inquired, looking at the young man with anticipation.

"Immediately quarantine. Both patients should remain in one room, and I'd have to give them a cloth mask before they leave. They'd need to be prescribed isoniazid, but given how long it seems to have festered, they should also need streptomycin." He looked to the doctor for approval.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," the older man said. "You need a sample to confirm your *suspected* diagnosis."

Dennis' brow furrowed. For a moment, he scoured his messy brain, full of jumbled and unpracticed medical knowledge. When he found what he was looking for, he lit up like a lightbulb. "Sputum sample."

Robby nodded.

"Sputum sample," Dennis repeated, pinching his lower lip, then adding, "We'd need to push it to a lab technician for AFB since the patients are as far along as... they are."

"Good judgment," the doctor praised.

Dennis' stomach fluttered.

"Once we confirm tuberculosis in both patients, we keep them quarantined and monitored in the hospital until there's progress. Subsiding fever, less frequent coughs, less AFB, etcetera."

He looked over at Heather for some—*any* form of approval. She let out a soft sigh and her forehead untensed, like she was relieved to hear Dennis nail the diagnosis. Another expression sat in her eyes, but it was an indiscernible one.

"How'd I do?" Dennis asked timidly, gaze darting back and forth between Heather and the doctor.

"A few areas to slow down on, in general. Get into the habit of asking every question. Consider *every* possibility. But, generally," Robby nodded, crossing his arms and slumping back in his seat, "good job, Whitaker. You saved a marriage from the whole 'death do us part' thing today." He snorted at his own joke.

"You're a downright genius, Miss Collins," Dennis smiled dopily, eyes lit up as he watched her shuffle the pages of her notes back into one stack.

She chuckled. "What're you butterin' me up for?"

The young man shook his head. "Just bein' honest. Running through an open appendectomy like that... y'didn't even stutter."

Robby nodded, eyes squinted to hide how proud of her he was, arms folded into his chest. "You *did* handle it very well."

"If it's so hard, why'd you quiz me on it, boy?" She chuckled at Dennis, ears burning as she deflected the praise from both men.

Dennis shot a look at Robby, who pursed his lips, cleared his throat, then admitted: "I had Dennis throw this one at you. I wanted to see your limits."

The woman blinked, eyebrows unknitting. "I see." After a pause, she added: "You found them yet, Dr. Robinavitch?" She watched a resigned smirk creep onto the man's face, then turned to Dennis and said, "And you did real well, yourself."

Having stayed up so late studying with Heather and Robby, Dennis had come into his shift the next day with very little sleep, and it was - as he'd have said about every shift he's worked for the last two weeks - one of the busiest days of his life. By the end of it, he was ready to keel over. Winter was no joke in Franklin, and a good chunk of its residents weren't too keen on health and safety anyway, as Dennis Whitaker had come to know.

"Tough fuckin' day," Dana groaned as Dennis walked up, planting his feet beside her just in front of the clinic.

The boy nodded, eyes fixated on the many different shoeprints in the snow, leading to and from the makeshift parking lot off to the side of the building. "Seems like it gets *busier* in the winter," he mumbled.

Dana clicked her tongue, "Ice slips, car accidents—sniffles, cruds, n' bugs, too. Whole lotta people got a whole lotta reasons to see Mr. Doctor." She tapped on the smoke in her hand, turned to Dennis, then added: "And that's on *top* of your regularly scheduled patients and accidents."

Doing a double take after having finally laid eyes on Dennis, she scolded: "Why haven't you got a *damn* coat on?"

The smoke of Dana's dimly glowing Winston cigarette was the only thing keeping Dennis from going numb in the snow—the only thing providing light in the otherwise dark night, aside from the harsh, pale light that shone from inside the clinic, through the windows behind them.

"I had a late night. Almost missed my alarm this morning," he chuckled exhaustedly, hugging himself and rubbing his upper arms up and down, vigorously.

"You n' Collins gotta quit keepin' each other up so late." Dana watched him as she took another deep drag. "I'd make you wear *mine*... but I got a hell of a walk home today."

"Husband's not pickin' you up?" Dennis' eyebrow raised.

"He's outta town—took the ride with him. Seein' family since he's gonna be stuck here with me and the kids for the holidays." She chuckled, but her face melted back into that intimidating, maternal expression as she said, "Bum Robby for a coat before you head out tonight, kid. I'm serious."

Dennis nodded, but he knew he likely wouldn't bug the man for any such reason.

After a moment of snowy silence, Dana off-handedly said, "He's been a real gentleman lately." Her lips held tightly to the butt of her cigarette before she perched it between her fingers, then continued, "I mean— at the expense of *sleep,* you and Collins seem to *really* be bringing the color back into his cheeks."

Dennis chuckled, eyelids heavy. "It's all Miss Collins." He tilted his head up, counting each twinkling star in the sky. "She's somethin' else. If life were any easier on her, I bet she'd be up and gone already—medical license in hand, openin' up a clinic of her own just like Dr. Robby."

"One day," Dana shrugged, musing softly about what kind of bright future might've been waiting for Heather. After a moment of soft, snowy silence, she turned to Dennis and assured, *"You've* got an effect on him too, though."

The young man didn't turn, but ears began feeling all fuzzy and hot. He heard the soft little taps of Dana's finger against the cigarette before she dragged it back between her lips. Facing the dark forest across the street, he mumbled, "How do you mean?"

"He's always goin' on about you is all," she said nonchalantly, like it didn't just rock Dennis' world. "Used to be he was dipping his fingers into *too* many pies. Trying to take care of the whole world at once. That burden... doing that'll wear you down real fast." Smoke curled from Dana's lips as she spoke. "I remember just last year I'd scold him about it what felt like *every* damn day after closing." She paused for a moment, brows relaxing as she looked at Dennis. "But I think you grounded him. Seems he's satisfied that itch, if only a little" she chuckled.

A huff of air escaped the young man's nose. If his face weren't frozen still, he imagined he'd look crazed after hearing those words from Dana's mouth. He wanted to pry further, but he was a smart enough man. There was no benefit to knowing more about what *may or may not* have been going through Robby's mind at any given time. Dennis Whitaker knew better than to paint a picture there. Doing so only ever led to hunger.

Like divine timing, the clinic door swung open behind the two of them. Dana turned first.

"Well *lookie* what the cat dragged out into the cold!" She fished the pack of Winstons from her pocket and tossed it to Robby as his crunching footsteps in the snow drew closer.

“Why are you two freezing your asses off out here? You don’t like my clinic?” The doctor joked, pulling a cigarette from the little cardboard box and perching it on his lips. He flicked open his silvery lighter, snapping it until a flicker of flame erupted, igniting the end and drawing in a heavy breath.

“Just wanted some fresh air,” Dana sighed. “Been cooped up behind the desk all day.”

”Why *were* you working so late, Dana?” Dennis asked, brows knitting together.

“Needed a few extra hours to cover the application fee,” she winked at the young man.

”Application fee?”

Robby turned to Dana, a shocked smirk creeping onto his lips. “After all these years, you finally did it?”

After a particularly long drag of her cig, Dana chuckled out a puff of smoke, nodding her head. “I fuckin’ did it.”

”Did what?” Dennis asked meekly, but impatiently. “You’re applyin’ for a new job?”

Robby and Dana let out full belly laughs.

"Jesus, Whitaker! You want me gone that quickly?" She hardly controlled her laughter, slapping Dennis' shoulder with her free hand.

The young man looked confused, but a smile tugged at his face. "Would you just tell me?"

"I applied for nursing school!" Dana blurted it out, arms raising above her head.

"You'll be a *nurse?"* Dennis' voice erupted with excitement.

"I might just be a *goddamn* registered nurse here in a few years!" The blonde woman let her cigarette fall into the snow, grabbing Dennis' shoulders. "Been thinkin' about it more recently, and UT's got a real good program, so... y'know."

Robby watched with a sentimental smile on his face as the two of them hugged and squealed like pigs into one another, rocking with joy. Dana's hair - neatly tucked into her brown hairclip as it was - nearly came undone by the time they'd settled down and let go of one another.

"What's your husband think about it? Your *kids?"*

"Adam's been pushin' me to do this for years! Same with *that* old grouch," she pointed back at Robby with her thumb. "Millie and Laura are still a bit too young to really get it, but they'll be proud of momma." Dana nodded to herself. "I'll make 'em proud. Make *myself* proud, too."

"We're all proud of you, Dana." Smoke slipped from Robby's parted lips as he smiled over at the woman.

"And what is— *where* is UT?" Dennis asked, a big smile still splitting his face.

And just like that, the excitement died.

Like the flame of a lighter snuffed out by a harsh gust of winter wind, Robby's smile faded. Dana's faded a bit slower, but it, too, fizzled out.

Clicking her tongue, Dana swept a stray bang from her forehead and said, "It's, uh... it's over yonder." She flicked her hand as if to point in its direction. "East Tennessee."

"East Tennessee?" Dennis' smile began to falter. He looked to Robby, whose face was now unreadable.

"It's in a city called Knoxville. About a three hour drive."

"Three— three hours?" Dennis' brows knitted together tightly. "How're you gonna manage that kind of commute every day?" It was a ridiculous question—he knew that.

"Well," Robby stressed, stepping over and standing just beside Dennis. He nudged the younger, shorter man with his elbow, looking down at him as he said, "Come autumn next year, you'll - if you're up for it, of course - probably take over for Dana here."

"I—" Dennis stammered, blinking as his brows tightened further. Robby was close enough to radiate warmth against him, but even that sensation slipped under like white noise. "Don't... get me wrong, Dana. I'm happy for you, but I couldn't possibly fill your shoes."

He spoke genuinely. Dennis Whitaker did not believe himself capable of filling Dana Evans' shoes. But it was a bit deeper than that; his comment was a front for what was *really* an inability to process that this little work family he'd grown to rely on would - in the foreseeable future - likely totally shift, should Dana's application be accepted. Dennis was talented, and he was smart. But he was equally unconfident in himself. And more pressingly,

he'd lulled himself into a false sense of security, naively dreaming that the dynamic within the Robinavitch Health Center would remain as it was *forever.* And he was not new to the idea of change. Afterall, he'd moved to Franklin from Nebraska, running away from a family—a *bond,* that did not belong to him.

"And what about..." he stammered, trying his hardest not to sound like a child. "What about *this?* The clinic, the... the— *us?"*

"What *about* you?" Dana forced a smile, slugging her arm around Dennis and rocking him reassuringly. "You and Robby'll kick ass whether or not I'm there. Collins, *too,* when the world lets her."

"I just mean—"

"I know what y'mean, kid," Dana interrupted softly, squeezing him closer to her. "Don't you dare make me start cryin' about this," she joked. "This is just somethin' I've gotta do."

Dennis knew that feeling. The pull of fate—knowing that something was meant for you. If moving to Knoxville for nursing school was what was meant for Dana, he was the last person on Earth who should whine about it. Admittedly, it *was* difficult not to feel the bubble of emotion creep up higher in his chest; his mind ran wild imagining a life at the clinic without Dana Evans. Dana *fucking* Evans. The woman who ran Michael Robinavitch like a dog. The woman who ran the *clinic* like a dog. The woman who cared for Dennis like his own mother never truly did. He knew he'd get over it, but he wouldn't get over it tonight.

"Don't psyche yourself out, Whitaker," she ruffled the younger man's short curls. "You're a hard worker, and you've got a *hell of a drive* for learning. That'll take you real far when you pick up med school. And you better do that eventually, you hear?" She pointed at Dennis as she began walking toward the gravel road. Her giant, puffy coat swaddled her like a newborn. "I ain't even leavin' for another year, anyway. And that's *if* I get accepted!" Stuffing her hands in the coat, she turned toward the road, back facing Robby and Dennis as she hollered, "Now, I gotta get home and let my nanny off the hook. Robby, put a coat on that boy before you send him home tonight!"

Save for the crush of cold leaves and ice beneath Dana's flat work shoes, it was silent for a moment. So silent, one could almost hear flakes of white snow as they fell and kissed the ground.

"I'm proud of you Miss Evans," Dennis hollered shyly, voice faltering only a little. "I really am excited for you."

Dana wasn't particularly great with goodbyes, and this wasn't even a goodbye yet. Even so, seeing the spark die in Whitaker's eyes the moment he realized she'd leave Franklin come next autumn... it was an oddly emotional image for the woman. Until that moment, she hadn't realized how much the kid meant to her. Hadn't *truly* realized how much Robby and Heather meant to her. Even Franklin—regardless how passionately she hated the political climate there. As she came to know, Tennessee may have been home to a range of nasty laws and bigoted assholes, but there *were* good people. Michael Robinavitch was good. Dennis Whitaker was good. Heather Collins was good.

As she stepped out onto the gravelly road, forcing herself not to imagine what Dennis looked like behind her, a single tear slipped down Dana's cheek. But at the same time, a fond, soft smile crept onto her lips.

"You alright?" Robby nudged close to Dennis, slinging his arm around the shorter man's shoulders and patting his arm reassuringly. The material of his sweater was soft like clouds against the back of Dennis' neck.

Still looking at the road - long after Dana was gone - Dennis replied, "Could I bum a cigarette?"

With his arm still around Dennis, Robby turned, eyes meeting the side of his face as he asked, "Since when do you smoke?"

"I don't," he admitted meekly.

"Hm," Robby let out a low, gravelly hum. He kept his arm around Dennis, but raised his hand up just enough to tap the younger man's bottom lip with his middle finger. Dennis only barely flinched. "Open," the doctor said.

Dennis obeyed, parting his lips just enough for Robby to slip the butt of his own cigarette - which he'd already taken several drags of - in. "Take a good breath," he instructed, watching as the shorter man's cheeked hollowed out a little. His calloused fingers grazed rough against Dennis' soft lips, heat radiating from them—and the cigarette.

He hadn't even finished filling his lungs before the burning in his throat became too much. Sputtering and coughing, Dennis bowed forward, puffs of smoke billowing from his mouth. Robby was already - almost instinctively - rubbing circles into his back with his palm, having tossed the offending cigarette into the snow at their feet.

"First time's never as fun as they make it look," he soothed, helping Dennis stand up straight again.

"I thought it'd knock the stress off," he admitted, wet, red eyes finding Robby's own dark brown pupils.

He looked pitiful. Granted, it *was,* in part, because he'd just been beaten by a smoke. But still, Robby could sense he wasn't taking Dana's news too well. The urge to *assist* crept up on him once again, and before he could rationalize, his lips were moving:

"Why don't you come up and get some warm food in your belly, Whitaker. I can cook up a dinner for you."

Dennis' eyes softened and his brows untensed. He parted his lips, but words did not come out.

Robby filled the silence: "What? You've still got *me."*

Robby's home above the clinic looked almost exactly as it did nearly two years ago, when Dennis had woken up in his tub, overheated and malnourished.

The walls surrounding them were pinewood panels, darkened to a color like rich amber. The glow of warm, orange lamps lit the walls sparsely and little faded picture frames hung from lazily hammered nails. Even from the kitchen table which Dennis sat at so very shyly, the scent of Michael Robinavitch swam around the home unignorably. The warm spice of his Clubman Pinaud aftershave tangled with the musk of worn leather furniture and tobacco that had seeped into the pinewood walls over many years; if Dennis' sour mood *could* be cured by anything, it would be that scent.

"Food's real good," he said unenthusiastically after clearing this throat, sinking his teeth down for another big bite of homemade hot water cornbread. He followed that bite with a forkful of smothered chicken, covered in onions and a savory, rich gravy.

Robby, eating at a considerably more polite pace, chuckled at Dennis from across the small dining table. "A patient told me about the magic of cast-iron skillets. Finally got around to buying one last week and decided to put it to use for the smothered chicken—he told me I *had* to try smothered chicken first thing."

"He was," Dennis swallowed a bite, "onto somethin'."

Robby snorted. He was leaned back in his chair, just watching Dennis.

"You're like a different person when you've got food in front of you, Whitaker. Can I *really* trust you're using your paychecks to buy groceries? Taking *care* of yourself?"

The younger man nodded, wiping his lips with a napkin before finishing off the final bites in his bowl.

"You just happen to catch me when I'm hungry, is all," he dismissed, mind clearly occupied.

The doctor leaned further back in his chair, spreading his legs lazily and tapping his finger idly on the edge of the dark, wooden dining table. Dennis didn't look up at him very much while he ate, so the doctor took the opportunity to study him more. He always wore plaid button-downs. His hair was always just shy of greasy. Dirty, light-brown hair which curled at its short ends. He always had bags under his eyes, like he didn't sleep—not dissimilar to Robby's own habits, though he didn't have the eyebags to show for it. If he had to put it into words, Robby decided he would - never outwardly - describe Dennis as cute. A man so greatly burdened by his past as well as the world around him, yet no less kind—no less innocent for it.

"I wanted to thank you," the doctor finally interrupted the silence.

Dennis looked up, meeting his warm eyes.

"What for?"

Robby shrugged. "You and Collins get along nicely."

The younger man blinked. "I don't see why we wouldn't. We got a lot in common."

"Of course—just, the circumstances of how you two met... it could've gone one of two *very* different ways. I'm glad I could trust you." He paused for a second, then decided to add: "Glad you found your place here. In Franklin."

"Her secret isn't mine to tell," Dennis shrugged, reciting Dana's words. After a pause and a brief swell of some unexplainable emotion within him, he added: "I've got secrets of my own, anyway. On some level, I think— I think I... *understand* what it's like."

Robby's brows furrowed. He squinted, as if trying to better read the young man across from him. "Is it," he began hesitantly, "too personal to ask what you might be referring—"

"Oh, *please,* Doctor Robby," Dennis blurted. He smacked the surface of the dining table with his palm; what followed that thud was pure, sharp silence.

Frankly, Dennis was tired. He'd just worked one of the longest shifts of his short career at the Robinavitch Health Center only to be told - by Dana herself - that she planned to leave next year. The kid wasn't an idiot: he knew his newfound, peaceful little life wouldn't stay *exactly* the same forever, but he'd certainly developed a sense of routine with Dana and Robby—now Collins, too. The prospect of losing part of that puzzle frazzled him more than even *he* recognized, until his palm had struck Robby's table; it was the most disrespect he'd ever shown to anyone, not that Robby particularly cared.

Across from him, the doctor sat still. He was leaned back in his chair, but his arms were folded now. He didn't look mad. Just... fazed.

Licking his lips, Dennis croaked, "I'm sorry." Robby was prepared to console him, but he was already speaking again: "It's just... you *know* what I am—what kind of man I am."

The older man immediately made the connection. He knew what Dennis was on about.

"Never had a girlfriend. Never talked about anyone I was hot for. Never talked about ex-lovers - who don't, as a matter of fact - even exist. Never felt that real deep sense of belonging in school even when I made my friends, seldom as they were. All of that bullshit just to come home each day and feel the *real* wrath from my own blood family—dusk 'till dawn. *'A real man this, a real man that,'* my father and my brothers and my mother would always say. They knew—*they knew* what kind of boy they brought into this world, even before I knew it myself. And if I could control it, I'd have rid myself of it a long, long time ago just to please them and know what it was like to be held in their approving arms. But in the end, I can't control it. Ran away from Nebraska all the way down south just to take up the same life I was livin' at home, only this time it nearly killed me in that field. 'Course, I guess dyin' of heat stroke on a shitty Tennessee farm is a little more dignified than bein' beaten to death by your own daddy for being a *faggot."*

He nearly flinched when the last word came out of his mouth, jaw clenching as he braced himself for God's bright, hot wrath to beam through the pinewood paneled walls and strike

him down—then and there.

But it did not come.

Robby sat exactly as he had been sitting the entire dinner. He looked concerned, sure, but he did *not* look disgusted. He did not gaze upon the boy with judgment in his eyes. His face was hardly readable at all, frankly. The only thing Dennis had to go off of was the deafening silence between the two of them as Robby - presumably - processed everything that had just spilled forth from the younger man's mouth.

When the silence had lasted long enough and it had become clear that Dennis was done speaking, Robby exhaled the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. His chair creaked as his weight shifted, leaning into the table.

Softly, he said, "How long?"

Dennis did not respond. His eyes were fixated on his own hands, picking at his fingernail as they rested on the table.

"Whitaker," Robby said. "Look at me."

Slowly, the boy's eyes drifted back up, obediently meeting Robby's.

"How long have you been letting this eat away at you?" He repeated.

The boy blinked, licked his lips, swallowed the lump in his throat. Slowly and messily, he croaked out: "Longer than I've been in Franklin."

A huff of air escaped Robby's nose and his jaw tightened.

"We fought," Dennis nodded, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye with his forearm. "Spring of 1960. Me and my father never got on too well, but... this was different. He went through my room and found my journal one day while I was out working the field." He paused. "I'd gotten used to writing down all my thoughts in it. Always figured it would be good for practicing academics. But it became... something of an outlet—a way for me to let out the *undignified* thoughts in my head."

"Undignified," Robby parroted, squinting his eyes.

The boy nodded. "When I came back in that night, he blew up. Went on about how disrespectful it was to live off of them while I thought such vile things. He kept yellin' and yellin'... and all my mother did was sit there in her little wooden chair. When he started hitting me, I—" he stammered, wiping another tear. "For the first and only time in my life, I started hittin' back."

Robby's brows knitted together, stress lines forming on his forehead.

"I wasn't very good at it. Didn't slug him too well, but I think seeing me fight back at all shocked him. Packed what I could carry that same night and snuck out into town. Got on a greyhound and headed off—anywhere but Broken Bow."

Dennis was the first to break their shared eye contact. He looked over to the right, tracing the dark lines of the pinewood panel walls as silence filled the room. Robby did not speak. He did not move. He sat still as a tree, eyes fixated on the young man across from him. Dennis was crying—or rather, tears were slipping silently down his cheek, reflecting shimmering warm light from the dim lamp in the living room.

"Anyway," he croaked, pushing the chair back and standing to his feet hastily. As he wiped more tears from his cheekbone with the back of his wrist, he said, "I've gone and screwed this all up, so, I'll see myself out." Dennis scurried for the door leading downstairs.

He knew it was over. Already, he was scolding himself—beating himself bloody in his mind for having told Robby his deepest secret. For having confided in a man who he had no right to bombard with such troubling information. Michael Robinavitch was a kind man, but he surely wouldn't let Dennis' secret slide, especially given his utter silence as the boy talked. Dennis had already made his mind; whatever family he'd been developing at the clinic and in Franklin, he'd just blown it all up. It was time to run away again, in *some* capacity.

Before he could get his hand on the knob, Robby called out from his seat at the dining table, "Dana will kill me if I don't send you home with a coat."

Dennis froze, hand suspended in motion just next to the golden knob of the door. He should've just left. It wouldn't be hard to turn that knob, swing the door open, sprint down the stairs, then sprint out into the cold.

But before he could finish imagining the lonely walk home in the dark, Robby was already behind him, tapping on the nape of his neck. Dennis flinched and gritted his teeth. Slowly, he turned to face the taller man, who clutched in his left hand a thick, brown Levi's sherpa with faded silver buttons and cream-colored wool on its inside.

"Should keep you warm," the older man spoke low, his voice sweet like warm honey.

Before Dennis could even protest, Robby was already slipping the jacket over his shoulders. When the younger man fit his arms through the large sleeves, Robby reached his calloused fingers down to the bottom, just near Dennis' waist. He clicked each silver button into place, slowly—agonizingly slowly. The boy watched as Robby's brows knitted with concentration, all the way until he reached the top button. His warm knuckles grazed against the spot just between Dennis' neck and his chin; it tingled like a teasing flame.

For a moment, Robby raised his hand, and the boy could've sworn he was about to cup his cheek, but he finally let it fall to his side as he said, "You've felt safe here in the clinic for two years now. That doesn't have to change—are you scared it'll change when Dana leaves?"

Dennis bit the inside of his cheek and hesitantly nodded.

Robby shook his head, a reassuring but subtle little smile creeping onto his lips as he repeated: "It doesn't have to change." He paused for a moment, then decided to add: "I won't shower you in dangerous platitudes about acceptance and futures, but..." he inhaled sharply, then nodded, "you're safe as long as you're here. In my clinic."

It was quiet enough to hear whistles of breath as they fluttered in and out of Dennis' nose. He stood there, just inches between himself and Robby, staring up at the man. Both of them had a look in their eyes like they were daring the other to do something they shouldn't. Dennis allowed that dangerous, tempting silence to ferment for only a few moments longer before deciding to close himself off.

"Thank you for lending me your coat, Dr. Robby. I'll bring it back Monday," he declared with a hollow tone. He turned the doorknob behind him and wished the man a goodnight in a soft mumble as he shuffled out the door.

When it closed, Robby stood just in front of the doorframe—longer than he should've needed to. His dark eyebrows knitted together and he chewed at his lip, rubbing his face up and down repeatedly as he processed what had just happened.

"Jesus Christ," he groaned into his palms.

Chapter End Notes

Well there you have it! I guess the question now is: "What will Robby do with this information?" Teehee!

Thank you so much for your continued support on my story. As a surprise, I've been writing and recording an original song called 'The Overs' to accompany the final chapter of the story, and I really can't wait to share it with you.

Chapter 6: Place To Be

Chapter Summary

On Christmas Eve after a particularly grueling week at the clinic, Robby shows up unannounced at Dennis' door.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 6's song is "Place To Be" by Nick Drake on his 1972 album, "Pink Moon"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With Robby's big sherpa hooked around his arm, Dennis pushed open the door of the Robinavitch Health Center. His eyes went wide as he took in the sight before him. The waiting area was more packed than he'd ever seen it; patients stood around without free chairs to sit in, and a crowd had formed at the front desk where Dana stood, a stressed, focused frown in her brows. It was, as Dennis said so very often for the last several weeks - but he *truly* meant it this time - probably going to be the busiest shift he'd ever work.

To his left, both waiting chairs were filled. A young boy sat clutching at his ear while his mother and father stood just beside him. In the chair next to him was David Saunders, accompanied by his mother, Theresa; they weren't an uncommon sight at the clinic. On the right side of the room was an older woman sitting while an older man stood just beside her, rubbing her shoulder as she rested her wrist awkwardly on her knee, face contorted in pain. Next to them, but noticeably scooted away was a woman who looked around Dennis' age, though it was hard to tell; she wore a cloth mask, leaving only sickly eyes visible as she leaned back in the chair. She looked on the verge of passing out.

Dennis blinked, then sighed. He shuffled past other incoming and outgoing patients and slithered his way to the front desk, where Dana greeted him with a tired nod.

"I'll be chainsmokin' by New Year at this rate," he quipped, setting his duffel down behind the desk.

"Welcome to it, kid," she chuckled. Noticing Robby's coat hooked on his arm, Dana tugged at it lightly and said, "You might as well stash it somewhere, Whitaker. He ain't stoppin' his rounds anytime soon."

The boy looked down at the coat, as though he forgot it was hanging on his arm, then looked back up at Dana. "Right," he stammered, "uh... should I just—"

"Give it," she chuckled, taking it from his arm and folding it neatly into a big square before placing it delicately on the top shelf behind the front desk. When she met eyes with Dennis again, Dana began briefing him: "Robby's got a full house today. *Obviously.* All four patient rooms have been full pretty much since sunrise." She slammed her appointment book on the desk, grabbing a pen and pointing around on the pages inside. "Driscoll will be in at four-thirty for a follow-up. You got two more scheduled appointments before the day's out, but your main concern right *now* is," she pointed her pen out at the crowd behind Dennis, "gettin' these folks ready for Robby."

Dennis looked behind him at the crowd, and when he turned back to face her, Dana was holding out a clipboard with triage sheets and a pencil attached. "I've got David and Theresa situated. And that sweet old lady over there. Eloise Sellars and her husband; poor girl slipped on ice in her driveway and landed on her wrist. We're talkin' at *least* a sprain." Dana then pointed to the little boy on the left side of the room, then the ill woman on the right side, saying, "Those two just came in."

Dennis nodded, grabbing the clipboard, hanging and preparing for triage.

He walked up to the little boy first, greeting his parents.

"I'm Clark, this is Marian," the father said. "And this is Benjamin," he pointed.

"Hello Benjamin, " Dennis tried in a soft, light tone. "Is it okay if I ask you a few questions about your ear, buddy?"

The little boy wiped tears from his eyes with his free hand, still clutching his ear with his right hand as he nodded.

Dennis began to write on the triage sheet as he examined the boy: *Benjamin Giles. Age 6. Male. Pain in right ear, duration of two days. Parents mentioned progressive worsening of pain. Temperature of 100.5°F, 96 bpm pulse.*

He continued writing until the form was chock-full of history information and remarks, Dennis stood to his feet and offered a sympathetic smile down at the boy. "You've been really helpful, Benjamin. We're gonna get you in an exam room as soon as we can, and Dr. Robinavitch will come in and help you from there, okay?"

"Okay," the little boy whined through a sniffle.

Dennis offered a final nod to the parents, then hustled over to the right side of the room, just in front of the other new incoming patient. Behind her cloth face mask, she had a dark complexion, but the color in her face was dull thanks to - what Dennis immediately assumed upon first glance - a possible flu.

"Hello, ma'am," he waved awkwardly, clutching his clipboard next to his chest as she looked up at him.

When her eyes met his, she sat up straight, adjusting her mask and waving. "Hello. Triage?" She pointed at his clipboard.

He nodded. "Isn't often that we see people wearing face masks in-clinic down here in Franklin," he chuckled, "I appreciate it. We all do."

"I'm a med student," she nodded back. "I feel your pain," she tried light-heartedly, but her voice was hoarse—fatigued.

The boy offered a sympathetic look, then asked, "Mind if I ask a few questions?"

"Go right ahead, Mister..." she trailed off, urging him to tell her his name.

"Dennis Whitaker," he shot a sheepish smile.

As he examined the woman, he once again filled out the fresh triage sheet: *Samira Mohan, age 26. Female. Body aches, fever, persistent cough and sore throat, duration of four days. Mentioned slight shortness of breath and nausea. Temperature of 102.3°F, 95 bpm pulse.*

He continued prodding the woman for her symptoms, and when he'd filled out the triage sheet entirely, Dennis looked up and asked, "Miss Samira, could I bring you anything while you wait? A blanket? A water?"

Samira nodded, "Both would be nice if it isn't any trouble. I'd appreciate that."

"On it," he smiled, spinning around and weaving through the crowd again.

Dennis was just about to pass the front desk when he caught Robby standing behind it, speaking to Dana. His feet moved before his mind did, and he swiveled, nearly tripping as he scurried over and laid the triage sheets in front of Dana.

"Dr. Robby," he interjected nervously.

"Hey, Whitaker," he smiled—a very *professional* smile. "You finished up with triage?"

"Just about. I, uh— I brought your coat back," he gestured behind the desk as Dana pulled it out, holding it in front of Robby like a dog treat.

Robby looked at the coat—studied it. Then his eyes flicked over to Dennis, giving him a notable lookdown before opening his mouth and inhaling sharp. He held that breath for a moment before saying, "You keep it. It looks good on you. Better than it did on me."

A hurricane of butterflies began tickling inside Dennis. His stomach buzzed, ears flushing red.

Before he could protest, and more notably, before Dana could process Dennis' visible reaction to the statement, Robby clapped his hands together once and said, "Alright! Dennis, it's a full house, and it's probably gonna *stay* that way for the rest of the day." He leaned in close, gesturing Dennis to do the same, so the boy did. In a lower voice, Robby explained: "I've got Lawrence Collins in room D—"

"Collins? Like..."

The older man nodded. "Heather's youngest brother. The whole reason we met her, in fact. He's got a pretty serious flu—she brought him in early this morning. Obviously, we can't have anyone go near that room until the clinic closes down."

Robby sounded stressed about the whole situation, but knowing him, Dennis knew he wouldn't have refused caring for the man if it was a real emergency. Still, he was confused about the whole *'brother'* situation. Last he'd heard, the man that Heather brought in two years ago for Robby to save was *'just a friend.'* The new development confused him, but he paid it little mind, more focused on the stress and exhaustion in Robby's voice.

"That is to *say*... prepare for a hell of a shift. It'll be busy today and we'll be spread thin." He patted Dennis' shoulder. "Alright?"

Dennis hesitantly nodded, a little afraid of what kind of day he was in for, but he pulled himself together quickly. Robby gave his shoulder one good final pat just firm enough to bring him back down to Earth.

"Good boy," he nodded. "Dana, help transition Whitaker to the desk and make sure things are going smoothly, then you're off the hook."

"Aye-aye, captain," she pursed her lips, folding her arms.

Robby turned, preparing to walk off, then sharply turned back with a snap of his fingers, saying, "Actually! While I've got you both, I was going to ask a question about New Year—"

"Before that," Dana politely but firmly interrupted, "I've got a possible frostbite patient waiting for you in B." She shoved a patient sheet into Robby's chest, then said, "Shuffled him in there almost five minutes ago now. Go deal with that. I promise I won't leave 'till you get your question out."

"Of course," he nodded, pressing his lips together and cramming his hands in the pocket of his black zip-up jacket.

"I've gotta go grab a blanket and some water for a patient, too, so..." Dennis trailed off, awkwardly turning before shuffling away, back through the crowd.

Robby nodded, giving the two of them one final glance before hustling over to exam room B.

His eyes flicked around the sheet on the clipboard as he opened the door, pressing inside as he wore a tiny, polite smile. It masked his overwhelm quite well.

"Mr. Willis," he greeted the older man sitting at the edge of the bed.

"Harold is fine," the man corrected through shivers. He was wrapped in a large, itchy-looking black blanket—one of the blankets Robby always kept in the back of the clinic for such situations.

"Noted, Harold. I'm Doctor Robinavitch but most everyone around here just calls me Robby," he pulled up the chair and sat just in front of Harold, whose fingers were pale-pink around the joints and ghost-white everywhere else, skin peeling present as well. As the doctor examined

them, he glanced briefly at the patient sheet, then hummed. "Were you working outside today, my friend?"

Harold nodded, "Yes sir."

"How long were you out there?"

"'Bout six hours before it got real bad."

"Did you have gloves on?"

"No sir—not for the most part."

"Any numbness anywhere else on your body? Your chart says the only complaint is your hands."

"Just my fingers," he shivered. "It's like pins and needles, too. I can barely move 'em."

Robby reached his hand out, gently and carefully holding up Harold's right hand. "I'm going to give a very light pinch to your fingers, you tell me what you can and can't feel, okay?"

Harold nodded and did just that. By the time Robby had made his way down each of the fingers in the man's right hand, he moved to each of the fingers from his left. It was a quick exam, and it *needed* to be a quick exam.

"Well, Harold," Robby nodded as he scooted his chair back, standing up and walking to the faucet on the opposite side of the room from the bed. He turned the handle all the way to the right, then looked at the patient. "Luckily, it looks like you got off with a case of *superficial* frostbite. It could've been a hell of a lot scarier had you stayed outside any longer, but we'll get blood back into your fingers. I'm just going to have you hold your hands under this water for about twenty minutes. Make sure the water stays warm, and when twenty minutes passes, I'll come back and see where we're at. Okay?"

The older man nodded.

Robby helped the man up and got his hands under the flowing water. Then he scribbled onto the patient sheet hastily and offered one more polite nod before walking back out of the room, closing the door behind him. Just as he turned his back to the door, Dennis walked past, but before the boy could get far, Robby gently placed his hand on the nape of his neck, guiding him.

"Woah," the older man stressed, as though Dennis were a car moving too fast. When the boy stood just in front of him, Robby said, "Where're you bolting off to, Whitaker?"

Dennis looked - as he usually did in the clinic when the doctor had things to say - like a hamster cornered in its cage. His tired eyes were wide, and the corners of his lips were downturned. He pointed toward the waiting room with his thumb and said, "New incoming. Dana needed help with triage, so I was..." he swallowed, "just finishing that up."

With a rub of his eyebrow, Robby mumbled, "Yeah, that's— good. Good." Then, he paused, inhaled, and blurted out in a half-whisper: "I need to reiterate that I *meant* what I said the other night."

Dennis cocked his head in confusion, chewing on his bottom lip while trying to ignore the sheer warmth of Robby's hand on his neck. That pleasure didn't last—the hand slid down his spine and ghosted off his body after a second more.

"About..." he hummed, "the—"

The doctor nodded. "About *'being safe in my clinic'* and whatnot? Yes, that." he confirmed, then nodded with a reassuring glare in his eyes. "You ran out before I could give my two cents, but— if nothing else, I needed to... make sure you knew."

As if waiting for a response, Robby just stared down at him, eyes searching his for a glimpse of an answer that did not immediately fill the silence.

"Uh," finally slipped out of Dennis' mouth—awkwardly. "Yeah," he blinked. "I— yes. I didn't think you were lyin' or anything. If that's," he stammered, "what you mean."

"No," Robby assured softly with a shake of his head. "I just mean... it wasn't bromide to soothe you in the moment and change my mind later."

Dennis' brows twitched, but after a moment more of searching the doctor's eyes for something he did not know to look for, his face untensed, and his lips thinned into a barely visible smile. He nodded, then said, "Okay," in the softest voice Robby had ever heard. "...Thank you."

And like it was a reward for verbalizing appreciation, Robby placed his hand on the younger man's shoulder again, giving a single firm pat. His palm rested there as he looked away, assessing the clinic with a sharp inhale through his nose. He even gave the shoulder a firm squeeze as he zoned back into his duties, clearing his throat and ordering: "If you're done catching up with triage, I could really use your help checking in on Lawrence every so often."

Dennis was a little impressed by how quickly Robby's professional mask slipped back over his face, but nodded. "Of course."

"Heather brought him in this morning with a fever just shy of a hundred and three. It stayed that way most of the afternoon, but I got it down a little these past two hours and gave him some codeine for his cough—which was *also* persistent," Robby was talking a mile a minute - as he usually did when stressed by any given situation - and Dennis had learned to keep up well. "And that's all on his patient chart, of course. I just need you to pop in once every so often and check in, alright?"

Dennis nodded, but couldn't hold back the little smirk that pulled at his lips.

"What?" Robby was mostly unaware of his tendency to ramble under pressure. But that was, to be fair, because he only ever did it around Dennis Whitaker.

"Nothing. I'm on it, Dr. Robby," he nodded.

The two exchanged indiscernible final glances before splitting off in opposite directions. Dennis shuffled toward the end of the hall where the warm lights dimmed slightly, yanking a disposable mask from the wall dispenser as he passed. When he opened the door to exam room D, he slid inside quickly and shut it just as fast.

Lawrence was sitting upright in the bed, eyes as wide as he could muster as fatigued as he was.

Dennis raised his arms up the moment he fixed the mask to his face, whispering: "I'm just here to check up on you, sir. Per Dr. Robby."

Lawrence relaxed a little as Dennis walked to the counter opposite the bed and picked up the patient chart, reading through.

"Mr. Collins, are you feelin' any better than when he last checked?"

"The nausea ain't swinging me around much now," the man spoke, voice weak and thin. "Codeine helped a bunch, too. Still feels like I'm burnin' up, though."

Dennis nodded, eyebrows raised as he explained, "That's mostly a good thing. Means your body's raising its own temperature to make it tough for your flu to survive. But let me just," he sifted around the counter for the glass thermometer, "grab your temperature real quick."

He shook the thermometer with a simple snap of his wrist, then walked over and politely directed Lawrence to lift his tongue. They waited for two minutes before Dennis took it out and read: "Just shy of a hundred and two. That's a lot better than what I heard you came in with this morning."

"Are you Mr. Dennis Whitaker?" Lawrence asked.

Dennis was already turned around, walking the thermometer to the counter for disinfection as he confirmed, "Yeah. Heather told you about me?"

"Said you were a real busy bee," Lawrence quipped.

Dennis whipped his head around and muttered shyly: "Really?"

A nod.

"Also said you were a real sharp kid. Big heart."

"Hm," his brows furrowed as he worked at the thermometer.

When he finished, he walked to the middle of the small room, standing awkwardly—*shyly,* and studying Lawrence. The man had the same dark complexion as Heather, only his skin was void of as much color thanks to the rough flu that ailed him. Little beads of sweat sat still following his hairline, and his eyes stayed shut, even as he conversated with the boy.

"She's real good at what she does," Dennis said.

The man in the bed lifted his lips just barely enough to constitute a smile, and he nodded just as weakly. "Just like our mama and daddy."

"They practice?" Dennis' face lit up.

"They're gone," Lawrence corrected softly. "Up with God now."

The light in Dennis' eyes died as quickly as it sparked, and he swallowed as he stammered, *"Oh*— I'm so sorry."

"It's been a few years," the man dismissed. "But I think their passin' *was* somethin' of a catalyst for her."

Silence filled the tiny exam room, and Dennis studied the vinyl floor which reflected dim light from the ceiling as he contemplated asking the question that thumped at the front of his skull.

"I heard she and Robby brought you in here a few years ago. Back in 1960. I heard y'all were just friends." He glanced down at the clipboard in his lap, tapping on it with the nail of his index finger before mumbling, "Didn't know she had a brother."

Huffs of air fluttered out of Lawrence's nose as he chuckled. "She's got *two!"*

Dennis tittered. He thought Lawrence's tone was amusing—like the man was offended Heather hadn't told people about him.

"I'm just giving her a hard time. She was right. She was just bein' careful," he settled as his chuckles quieted to a halt.

"How do you mean?" Dennis asked innocently.

"I mean: black folks get turned away all the time by doctors—for *every* little reason. Especially 'round *here."*

It was the first time Dennis had ever heard the word 'black' used in that way. He noted that dully, but kept his attention focused on Lawrence; his voice was quiet—almost easy to miss given the unceasing commotion outside the door.

Lawrence mimed a doctor with his hands as he mocked: *"'We'd take you, but you'd tell your family, and we don't have the resources to handle that!'* And every other excuse under the sun, no matter *how* bad you needed help."

He paused to cough, clearly straining himself by chatting so much when he should really be resting.

"Dr. Robby seemed kind, don't get me wrong, but Heather said she wanted to be real careful. Didn't want him to think she'd come back," a dry cough, "later askin' him to treat the whole family—what's *left* of us. That kind of thing's a big ask outside of Baptist Neck."

"Baptist Neck?" Dennis asked softly.

"Street we grew up on. Used to have a doctor that would actually *see* us," the man shook his head on the pillow, eyes still closed. "Real kind fella. He ain't here no more." He paused to swallow, then took a deep breath in, which snowballed into a quick fit of coughing. When it settled, he began again: "Anyway... Heather didn't wanna say we were siblings just to get turned away again. She wanted to be real careful."

"Dr. Robby's a good man. He wouldn't—"

"—One good apple in the basket doesn't mean the others ain't rotten," Lawrence interrupted softly.

Dennis blinked.

"And the world's a real *rotten* basket, Mr. Whitaker."

Lawrence's words rewired Dennis Whitaker's brain in real time, like piecing together a puzzle that he never otherwise would have seen. But once he did see what the man meant, he realized how familiar it all looked. He knew what it was like to lie—knew what it was like to fear rejection - or worse - for something he could not change.

"Yeah," he nodded, head bowed forward as he picked at the skin of his cuticle, hands rested in his lap meekly. "Yeah," he repeated, weaker and quieter. Before he allowed Lawrence to continue pushing himself by talking instead of resting, Dennis stood to his feet and said, "I should let you rest, Mr. Collins. Like I said, though: I'll be in and out as much as I can to check on you."

The man acquiesced, adjusting until he was laying down flat on the bed again. Dennis had his hand on the knob of the door, but Lawrence said, "Mr. Whitaker?"

"Yes?" He turned.

"...Thank you."

For several seconds, the boy simply stared at the man, whose eyes were closed. "Of course."

He slipped out of the door and shut it behind him quickly and quietly, shuffling to the bathroom at the end of the hall and disposing of the mask. He washed his hands fast, then scurried back down the hall and into the front of the clinic, where Robby and Dana stood once again at the front desk.

As he walked behind Robby, Dennis leaned just enough to whisper, "He's doing better," into the man's ear.

Before he could walk any further, Robby hastily spoke: "Let me borrow you for a second."

Dennis stopped and turned, eyeing Dana, then the doctor himself.

"I'll be quick, I know Dana's itching to get home. We do a small thing every year. It's," he waved his hand dismissively, "nothing wild, just a little get-together and a dinner on New Year's Eve."

"Oh, how fun," Dennis' voice grew bubbly, eyes darting back and forth between Robby and Dana.

She adjusted the blond bun at the back of her head as she clarified, "Real informal sort of thing. Adam and the kids come help me make Mr. Grouch over here feel less lonely," she jabbed her accusatory thumb into Robby's arm. "But he won't tell it to you like that," she snickered.

"I'll keep the food to myself this year, then," the doctor nodded.

"Oh, come *on,* Robby!"

"No, no, it's alright. It's quite alright. I can eat alone!" His sarcasm pulled a poorly-hidden smile from Dennis' face.

"Oh hush," she swatted.

"But, that is to say: you're more than welcome to join in if you'd like, Whitaker." Robby began rubbing the back of his neck, looking more uncertain as he turned to Dana and said, "Which leads me to my question for *you."*

He leaned over the front desk that separated the two of them, whispering a question Dana's ear that Dennis could not hear. It felt ever so subtly insulting, but that feeling quickly drowned under the millions of other thoughts racing through his mind. When the older man pulled back, Dennis watched as the two of them exchanged a glance. Dana looked troubled.

She chewed at her lip, resting a hand on her hip as she sighed and said, "Adam and the kids wouldn't give a rat's ass. But—whatever you do, *don't* be pushy about it. Just make it clear that she's more than welcome to come *if* she's comfortable doin' so, alright, Robby? Only if she's comfortable."

The man flashed two thumbs up at Dana, already stepping backward as he said, "Great. Whitaker?"

"I'd like to go," Dennis affirmed.

The world stopped for a moment as he took in the little, easily-missed smile that crept onto the corner of Robby's mouth.

"Fantastic," he said. Then, his tone felt serious again as he explained, "Now, I've got to get to a patient. Dana," he pointed at the blond woman. "If I don't see you again, get home safe, I'll see you early tomorrow. Whitaker," he pointed at the boy, "if I'm not out in five minutes, go check on Mr. Willis in B." He briefed Dennis on the superficial frostbite in the patient's fingers and instructed him to keep them under warm water.

"Yes sir," he nodded, grabbing a clipboard of triage sheets from the desk and hustling over to a new crowd of incoming patients.

The day did not relent until long past the Robinavitch Health Center's typical closing hours. Generally speaking, as a rural clinic with such limited resources, Robby *should've* kept the hours strict and tight like just about every other clinic in the south. But he could count on one hand the times in his life he'd closed the clinic on-time—and he'd *certainly* never closed it early. Even when the place was closed, he'd always make sure to leave a hanging metal sign on the front door, crammed with the information and addresses of nearby hospitals.

After hanging it up on the suction-cup hook and tromping back inside, he took what felt like his first full breath since the day had begun. Rubbing his tired eyes and palming the stress from his cheeks, Robby let a prolonged groan curl forth from his throat.

"I think I'm getting too old for this, Whitaker," he half-joked, hollering toward the hallway where the boy was busy cleaning up the now empty exam rooms—save for room D, which was *certainly* not empty.

Dennis closed the door behind him as he exited exam room C, hauling three large, black trash bags over his boney shoulder, knuckles white as he held onto them.

"For the clinic?" He asked.

Robby found it strangely endearing the way Dennis always took a statement literally—took *many* things literally. He certainly had a sense of humor, but a lot of times, his first instinct was to take a person seriously before assuming they were joshing around. That, to the doctor, was kind of cute.

"Well, that too," he quipped, but frankly, neither he nor Dennis was sure what that meant. "You did fantastic today, kid."

Dennis nodded, feeling a modest little grin settle onto his face.

"...And, about the other day, Whitaker?" Robby rubbed at the dark beard on his jawline, watching as Dennis' brows raised in response. "I still didn't get to say much earlier. I—"

"—It's fine, really," the boy cut him off, turning awkwardly and scurrying toward the hall with the trash bags in his hands. "It's not somethin' I wanna talk about anymore, if it's all the same to you."

Being interrupted - or more accurately: *hastily* cut off in an odd sort of panic - by Dennis Whitaker was a real rarity; it took Robby off guard a little, but also immediately signaled to him that he should just drop it altogether. He certainly didn't like beating dead bushes. *But,* to

Robby, what Dennis had told him last week at his dining table wasn't a dead bush. It was a lit flame that threatened to continue growing until it swallowed a whole forest.

Perhaps Robby was the forest. Or perhaps he was the flame.

Dennis scampered down the hall, bags of trash knocking at his legs regardless how he shifted their weight in his grasp. It was his least favorite part of a shift at the clinic, but it was proving useful in that moment—keeping his mind from replaying his *incident* at Robby's dining table, regardless how many times the man tried bringing it up. Dennis was doing his best to suppress any train of thought that could lead him to that sinful sense of hunger he'd gotten so decent at controlling, but having been reminded by Robby twice in one day, he was losing—

"Mr. Whitaker?" Heather stood in the frame of the door leading outside to the back of the clinic. Dennis' hand was still on the knob, but as her voice pulled him back to reality, he hastily moved out of the way and allowed her in.

"Apologies, Miss Collins," he bowed his head. "Busy day. Brain's all but mush."

"I see," she agreed, heels clacking softly on the vinyl floor as she passed the boy.

Before he walked any further, he turned and raised his index finger as he said, "Your brother's doing a lot better already. I'll come inside in a sec and give you the rundown."

The door closed behind him, and he trudged through the crunchy snow just a few feet forward before heaving the bags of trash up and into the massive bin that hugged the back wall of the clinic.

It was a quiet, dark night in Franklin. Snow fell softly onto the crown of his head where golden, dirty locks of hair caught them. The scary thing about the snow was that it truly muffled every fathomable sound of nature, leaving but one noise for Dennis to focus on: the voice in his head.

He turned his back to the door and leaned his weight into it, pinching the bridge of his nose, then rubbing circles into his temples. Perhaps some combination of stress from the day was mixing poorly with the other thoughts in his mind, because the overwhelm swept him like an avalanche. All at once, the irrational fear of rejection hit him. Robby could say every word in the English language, and none of it would convince Dennis - not while he was so drained - that he truly had no issues with his choices. And the problem was, one could not *unhear* a confession like the one Dennis had given. Robby would forever be aware of that secret, and that frightened the boy more than anything else in the world.

He allowed himself a reward for his tiring work that day: a single, soft sob, muffled by the palm of his shivering hand.

After a moment basking in the silence, he pulled himself upright and swung the back door open once more. Warm air rushed onto his cheeks, eliciting a buzzing, tingling sensation. The door slammed shut behind him, and he scurried meekly back down the hall toward the front desk, tracking little clumps of snow with him as he stepped.

"His fever's down to about a hundred and one," Robby nodded, already mid-conversation with Heather about her brother. When Dennis caught his eye, he gestured to the boy and said, "Thanks to Whitaker."

"I didn't do anything," he dismissed lightly, shuffling behind the front desk and squatting to idly sort papers. "Just checked up on him as much as I could."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Whitaker," Heather glanced at the desk. She returned her eyes to Robby's, then firmly offered, "Thank you."

The doctor couldn't lie and pretend it wasn't immensely stressful keeping Lawrence hidden away in one of only four exam rooms, leaving what would've been a *relatively* normal day to becoming single-handedly the most crowded day he'd had all year.

Even so, he mustered a polite nod and rasped out the words: "Any time."

"And what were you sayin' about New Year?" Heather recalled.

The statement pulled Dennis' attention. He peeked over the surface of the front desk as Robby said, "Right! We're doing a little get-together for New Year like we always do, and I figured it'd be a bit rude not to extend an invite—*open* invite, zero pressure. If you can make it, we'd love to have you, if not—"

"Who is 'we'?"

"Myself," Robby pointed his index finger into his chest, "Dennis, Dana, her husband, two kids. That's all."

Hearing Dana's family be mentioned set a stale look on Heather's face.

Robby, having immediately noticed, explained: "They're good people. Her husband's into a *lot* of activism up in Nashville and her kids are far too young to have pulled any nasty ideologies from classmates, or what have you..." he drifted off.

"Frankly... and I *do* appreciate the offer, Doctor Robinavitch, I just shouldn't. I mean, I'm not even supposed to be *here,"* she gestured around the clinic. "At all."

"According to who?" Robby brushed off her point with a shrug.

She shot him an incredulous look. "You weren't born yesterday. Neither was I."

"Well, you're here anyway, aren't you?"

Heather paused. She didn't really know how to argue with that, at least.

Instead, she shook her head and mustered another response: "...I'd not feel too kind leaving my brothers behind for New Year. I'm all they've got. So, I really do appreciate your invite, but—"

"You could bring 'em," Dennis interrupted softly from behind the desk.

Neither Heather nor Robby turned to Dennis, but the boy's suggestion hung in the air between them—in the silence.

"Lawrence and your middle brother, I mean." The boy cleared his throat and continued: "New Year's still two weeks out. He'll be non-contagious and probably back hopping on two feet by then."

Heather could sense that he'd taken a liking to Lawrence, on some level.

Robby shrugged, eyes still fixated on the woman's own dark brown pupils as he muttered in agreement with Dennis, "Why not? Bring them with you. Between Dana and I, we've got enough food to share."

"Heavens," she groaned, rubbing soothing circles into her temples as she shook her head. "I *don't* know that it's—"

"Just think it over," Robby pushed softly. "Don't stress about it tonight, just keep it on your mind—ask your brothers how they'd feel."

Finally, Heather glanced over at Dennis, who picked at his fingernail nervously, hands hugged into his sternum. He broke eye contact as soon as hers met his, but listened as she sighed.

"I'll talk to them," she resigned in monotone—detached and stern.

Days later, on the eve of December twenty-fifth, Michael Robinavitch kept his clinic closed. He'd have liked to keep it open and run it himself as he'd done for years prior, but this winter was a different world. Times were changing, and while the troubles of the people grew, the resources to supply and sustain emergency medicine - as makeshift and unofficial as it truly was - did not. Robby had been hearing chatter about it, too—it wasn't just Franklin which suffered from the evolving need for such care; it was everywhere. Every city. Every state. There would not be another shipment of his supplies from local hospitals until after the holidays - which was not abnormal, but having so few supplies left to work with during such downtime *was* abnormal - so he and Dana had worked out a plan to limit his care to regular house visits.

Thus, instead of serving the people he'd grown to care for after near-decades of working in the small town, he hung up the hospital information sign at the front door, grabbed mail from just beside the street, then locked himself in for the day. The man burned through most of the afternoon in his tub, pruning until the water had gone cool. He'd brought his mail with him, leaving the pile sitting on the little wooden table just beside. Every so often he'd dry his hands off with a free towel, careful not to splash even a single drop of bathwater on the papers as he worked his way down the stack.

Utility bill. Mortgage statement. A cream-colored envelope from the NAACP—Robby skimmed through that one: it urged a stronger push to pressure the Kennedy Administration for a more potent Civil Rights bill. One had passed in June, but it was just groundwork. Robby flipped through another piece of mail from a local church—they were always trying to drag him in there. He snorted, then tossed that one. It skated on the floor until it hit the dark baseboard moulding opposite the bathroom.

He was about to toss the whole stack, but a name caught his eye on the envelope now at the top of the stack. Robby squinted, lifting himself up just enough to extend his neck and confirm. The envelope looked cheap, and in poor, pencil handwriting, the front said: *For Dr. Robby.*

Robby's family did not usually send him mail—they hardly likely knew he was alive. The man was horrendous at keeping in contact through long distance, regardless how deeply he loved his family. But mail from family was not necessarily unheard of for him, so he carefully pinched the envelope between his fingers and tore the edge neatly, pulling out a folded sheet of blank paper inside. It had what looked like a tiny stain of food on the top left corner, and the handwriting was hardly legible.

December 25, 1961

Dear Dr. Robby,

It is Dennis Whitaker, and I wanted to write you to thank you for everything you do for me. I am not sure my behavior last week was reflecting how I really feel, because I really feel scared. I know you are a busy man and therefore should not feel obligated to read my whining any more than you already heard it. So I will say it plain: you know more about me than I wanted you to, and that scares me.

But Doctor Robby, you have also proven time and time again that you are a good man.

Lawrence Collins told me that even a basket of rotting apples can have one good one left. It does not mean I can trust every apple, but I know I can trust you.

I have seen the ways in which you care for others. I have seen the pieces of yourself that you break away to nourish the needing world around you. I should know because you have broken off so many pieces of yourself to help me.

I will not pretend to be a poet, so again I will say plainly: knowing you as well as I believe I do, it was unfair to cut you off. It was very scary and I did not want to hear what I feared you would say to me about my past, because it took everything of me to run away from it. But I believe maybe you only meant to console me.

I quite enjoy working at the clinic. I will hopefully learn to live without Dana being there. After all, I've got you, too.

Thank you for providing me a place to be,

D.W.

Robby held onto the letter like it would flutter away if he let up. He let out a long sigh and wasted no time pulling himself out of the tub. He held the letter above his head as his bare body tracked water across the bathroom floor. Placing the letter on the edge of his sink counter, he yanked his soft brown towel from its hanging bar and dried himself off, from his feet to his face.

The pounding in his heart continued as he stormed through his living room, having only just jumped into a fresh pair of underwear as he approached his little golden bar cart in the corner. The man gnawed at the inside of his cheek, contemplating so very heavily.

He knew Dennis had no one to spend the holiday with. And in any case, Robby also intended to spend the holiday alone; he did not celebrate Christmas, and typically stayed huddled in his home during winter months. But he was such a stubborn man; he still hadn't properly gotten his two cents out about Dennis Whitaker's secret.

"Still haven't said my piece," he mumbled, shaking his head as his eyes bore holes into the tied cans of red and white Budweiser beer atop the bar cart.

Robby repeated that phrase in his head over and over as he packed the beers in a neat brown paper bag and dressed himself head to toe in thick, winter clothes.

It was his excuse to go pester Dennis Whitaker.

It was his excuse to - for once in his life, at least since he'd moved to Tennessee a decade ago - allow himself to enjoy the company of another during the holiday. It wasn't like he had anything better to do anyway; this was the first day in as long as he could remember that the clinic would not be open at all. He'd become, as most people did when they drowned themselves in work to avoid their issues, painfully reliant on the noise. Without it, he did not know how to quell the thoughts racing through his mind, and the aching of loneliness which had long since become white noise now panged around deep in his bones. Robby wasn't sure Dennis would've been his first choice of companions on his one day off in months, but the kid was kind, and he owed him a little grace after everything they'd been through together the past few weeks.

He buttoned his black coat, grabbed the handle of the big paper bag chock full of beer cans, then made his way downstairs. Cold winter gusts bombarded him the moment he stepped outside of the clinic, and his feet crunched in the snow as he trudged toward his car.

"Dammit!" He snapped as the bottom of the bag gave out, the cans of beer plopping one after another into the snow.

Hastily, Robby squatted and grabbed as many as he could carry in his arms, shuffling to the car and struggling to raise open the trunk. When finally he succeeded, the cans fell from his arms and into the little space. The man ran back to grab the remaining two cans from their cushion in the snow, placing them more kindly into the trunk and slamming it shut before rushing to his seat behind the wheel.

Dennis Whitaker's home had become something of a library, increasingly full of notes and journals and medical books as he'd begun earning steady income working at the clinic. He'd grown attached to his little one-story house in his quiet, secluded neighborhood, and though he could probably have afforded to upgrade - even just a little - he didn't.

He sat at his newly-purchased oak desk, scribbling notes into his most recent journal while his eyes flicked from paper to page. Something about writing down the information he was reading helped drastically improve his ability to remember it—to turn it into muscle memory. Working as busily as he did at the clinic over the winter had also played a large role in honing his ability to assess under pressure and take on a broader medical perspective.

The boy was so deeply focused on the page he'd been scribbling on, he nearly missed the hundredth knock at his door, even as it grew louder and louder.

When it finally pulled his focus, Dennis shot up from his desk, scurrying over with a cocked eyebrow and folded arms. He swung open the door, and there stood Michael Robinavitch, bundled in a black winter coat, cheeks flushed in the cold, hair still damp from what could only have been a bath.

"It's a little chilly out here," Robby quipped, shivering against the pure-white, snowy backdrop.

Dennis' eyes met the beer cans stacked precariously in the man's arms, then they returned to his pupils as he stammered, "Dr. Robby?"

"Can I come in?" He urged, and Dennis was already nodding.

"Yes— please."

"Thanks."

"Are you alright?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"...I," Dennis blinked, following with his eyes as Robby tracked snow into his home and set the festive cans of beer down on his dinky wooden dining table—the same table he'd eaten so much of Robby's leftovers at whenever the man would send him home with them. "No reason. I just wasn't expecting you, is all."

Robby turned as he stacked the beers. "I got your letter."

"You did," Dennis' brow twitched.

"Figured you'd finally let me talk. About the thing. The—"

"Right," the boy sighed.

He wasn't *actually* prepared to hear what Robby had to say about any of his secrets, but he'd sort of signed himself up for that with the letter he'd written, mailed, and forgotten about.

"Right," he repeated, rubbing his forehead with the back of his hand as he closed the front door. "On Christmas Eve? Is that the greatest time to have this conversation?"

"I don't celebrate Christmas, Whitaker," the older man said matter-of-factly.

"...I'm aware. *I* do."

"Oh, *really?* Got any plans?" Robby looked around the empty room, tongue sharp with wit.

Dennis swallowed. "Well— *no,* but..."

Robby cracked open the top of a can and turned to face Dennis with his nose in the air, shrugging as he spoke, "Just a few beers and a talk. Can I ask for that?"

The boy blinked, lips parted with a hint of disbelief at the older man's audacity, but still found himself reaching for the can as Robby extended his arm.

Dennis sat on one end of the couch, Robby on the other, leaving lots of space between them. The pitiful-looking fireplace across the room did a surprisingly good job of warming the living area, and it left a golden glow on the older man's face that Dennis could not help but stare at.

For a while, they sat in silence. Dennis sipped modestly at his can of beer, Robby already on his second.

As he cracked open the top, the older man finally placated, "I'm very sorry I didn't make you feel safe hearing what I had to say about it. Your past."

"You couldn't have done any better."

"I'm not good enough?"

"You know that isn't what I mean," Dennis rolled his eyes.

"I know," Robby chuckled, sipping.

"What I mean is... well, it's just what my letter said. You proved over and over that you're a good man, I— I dunno why I'm so scared of... the knowing. You knowing me deeper than I wanted. Or..." he trailed off, rambling, "maybe I *wanted* you to know, and it was just gonna be scary no matter how the cookie crumbled, I don't know. You know what the APA says. It's a mental disorder. And I don't have it in me to plaster *that* on my record."

A look settled onto Robby's face, one that screamed like he *needed* to say something.

"I've met many, many people in my life, Whitaker. You don't make it as far as I have without meeting a lot of people. And the more people you meet, the more you realize how much

things like this shouldn't matter. There are more than three billion people on this planet. Did you know that?"

Dennis shook his head.

"Three *billion.* That's unimaginable. Out of *three billion people,* why should it shock *anyone* that some of them are different?"

The question hung in the air, and Dennis did not answer it.

"I couldn't fathom becoming a father, only to shun my child should he become a different man than I expected to see." Robby paused, contemplating the worth of continuing. His brows knitted together and his head shook as he blurted: "I couldn't fathom being shunned by the very people who brought me into this world. For something I could *not* control."

An unreadable light flashed in the doctor's eyes. He sniffled with a twitch of his nose, then tipped his head back to sip the last of his third can.

"When did you know?"

"What?" Dennis blinked.

"When did you know you were a homosexual?"

"Okay," Dennis leaned forward, prepared to reach for Robby's can. "Maybe three's enough for you. You're startin' to ask things you *really* don't mean to ask—"

As Dennis reached his hand out, Robby grabbed firmly to his wrist, stopping his motion as he held the beer can in his other hand pointedly *away* from him.

"Dammit, Dennis Whitaker, you *owe* me some transparency," Robby snapped. "If I wanted to shut you out or admit you for it, Jesus *Christ,* I would've done so by now!"

The boy's lip twitched. He knew he owed Michael Robinavitch transparency—or at least a little grace. The man had spent the last two years picking up what few pieces of himself Dennis had smuggled to Franklin, putting them back together at his own steady, firm pace. He was the reason Dennis was alive, for God's sake. He was the reason Dennis had a job, and the reason he still had people he cared about.

Without letting go of the boy's wrist, Robby took one more hefty swig of his can, then set it down on the little coffee table in front of the couch. When he leaned back into the couch, his hand shifted, ghosting over Dennis' palm until he was just *barely* holding it—rubbing circles over the knuckles with his thumb. His eyes fixated on those rough knuckles. That thin, calloused, farm-worn hand.

"...I guess I always knew," Dennis mumbled. "I imagine it's just somethin' I figured out because I was the only one of my brothers who didn't drool over all the pretty girls at church. Or school." He paused. "I could live like that forever—I think. When you grow up without love, you never really learn to miss it."

"God," Robby groaned, shaking his head.

"What?" Dennis asked, almost defensively.

"Why do that to yourself? I mean, why—"

"Because of the fucking APA? Because I could ruin my future, I could... what do you mean *'why'?"* Dennis scoffed, pulling his hand away from Robby. "I don't even know why I'm still telling you all of this!" He let out a singular, hysterical laugh. "You're askin' dumb questions because you don't know anything about it!"

"Dumb questions?"

"Dumb questions!" The boy spat.

"Really?"

"Yes! What else is there to say? You couldn't *possibly* understand what it's like."

Robby clenched his jaw tightly, turning to Dennis and demanding: "Then make me understand it."

The boy stared, dumbfounded, at the doctor.

Silence filled the living area, save for the crackling of the fireplace.

"You've gone batshit crazy," he shook his head.

"Have I?" Robby dared.

"You have."

Robby nodded, "Will you then, per the APA, admit me to psychotherapy? Or maybe shock therapy would fix me?" He mocked his own tone—that tone he'd always use when providing Dennis or Heather with medical hypotheticals.

"Fuck you*,"* Dennis genuinely whined.

"I'm serious."

"You're an *asshole!"*

"Oh, please. It's no different than assessing any other ailment, right?"

"It's—"

"Diagnose me, Whitaker. So that I might be cured of wanting you."

Those last words weren't necessarily supposed to come out. Even Robby himself seemed a little shocked he said it, but it was nothing compared to Dennis' reaction. He visibly flinched, eyes widening like a deer in headlights as his lips parted—perhaps he wanted to say

something, but words did not come out. The older man stuck his nose up as the edges of his lips curled down, as if to double down on his behavior—as if to *really* dare Dennis Whitaker to do something.

Before he knew it, Dennis was straddling Robby, their lips smashed together with near-painful force. The older man's large hands hovered just over Dennis' ass, shocked for just a moment before they finally settled. He felt the doctor's curious hand drag up to his hip, stopping to grab firmly at the curve of his waist with possessive force. Deep, gravelly groans escaped Robby's mouth as Dennis shifted in his lap, ghosting his own hands up the small of the man's back over his sweater and tangling his fingers into dark, shaggy locks of brown hair.

The scent of the older man overwhelmed him; it was a musk that Dennis had become familiar with drowning in any time he was invited up into the man's home, but his skin also smelled faintly of bath soap. His dark hair was still damp, too, between Dennis' fingers.

The doctor mumbled against Dennis' wetted lips, "Only you."

The boy wasn't sure what that meant, but it was just enough of a break between the kiss for Dennis to *really* snap out of it.

He jerked back, trying awkwardly to shuffle out of Robby's lap and to his feet.

"I don't know what the hell's gotten into us," Dennis' voice shook, heart pounding with crushing force against his chest. "But that's... quite enough, I think," he added, unconvincingly.

Be it the alcohol in the older man's system or pure madness, he reached out and grabbed Dennis' wrist, keeping the boy from straying too far as he said, "It's a little late for that now, is it not, Whitaker?"

The overwhelm of lust revived in Dennis' loins as quickly as he'd pushed it away. Quicker, even. His lips shone wet with Robby's spit, hair disheveled, flannel tugged at the collar like he'd been mauled.

"No one's watching us," Robby added softly, like he was equally trying to convince *himself* of that.

"God's watching us!" Dennis frowned, maintaining the feeble distance between them.

It took a lot for Robby to keep himself from rolling his eyes. He'd all but given up on God—long ago, too. In his opinion, if God truly cared, the being would have stopped a great many unfortunate events throughout Robby's life. Thus, he didn't necessarily see the harm in partaking in an unfortunate event of his own choosing, for once.

Alas, he could never bring himself to pressure Dennis Whitaker to do this, especially not when it was something he himself had never even *fathomed* trying; intimacy with a man.

An unheard of thing, really. A dangerous thing.

"...Okay," Robby resigned softly. Thoughtfully. He let his hand slip away, falling to his lap as he eyed the boy in front of him.

But, for Dennis, it was different now that he was being given the chance to pull away.

It was a chance he was reluctant to take.

Dennis may never again be given the opportunity to taste a pleasure like this. He knew he'd either die alone or marry a woman and feign attraction until death do they part. That was an inevitability he'd long since come to terms with. It was a long, mundane life he'd come to terms with. The issue was, until he'd met Michael Robinavitch, there wasn't a third option to consider. There was no exciting, dangerous third path for Dennis to dare himself to walk toward.

This reluctance which kept him from backing out from between Robby's legs was born of a hunger that had been festering within him for almost two years now.

What would be the cost of not trying it? Even if only once?

"Will..." Dennis began, so very hesitantly as he avoided Robby's eyes, "...will we ever get a chance like this again?"

The question was perplexing. Robby's brows furrowed, and he watched the frustrated expression on Dennis' face melt into one of openness. A timid, reluctant openness to entertain this horrible idea that sat in the air between the two of them.

Truthfully, Robby didn't have an answer to the question, and he wouldn't act as though he did. "All I can say for certain," he breathed heavily, "is that I'm here right now."

"...One time," Dennis mumbled, lower than a whisper.

Robby was already nodding, legs opening again as lust and holiday beer coursed through his veins. "One time," he parroted softly.

"Then this'll pass," Dennis added, almost like a plea to God. Or a plea to himself.

With a foot forward, the younger man stepped back into Robby's space, breath heavy as they began, once again, to swim in one another's eyes.

Slowly, Dennis melted back into Robby's lap, partaking in a stalemate with the older man, both wanting to steal the first kiss, but neither daring to. Their exhales danced into one another and Robby searched for permission on Dennis' face, keeping himself at bay and allowing the younger man to go this at his own pace.

Seconds later, Dennis' hands found Robby's cheeks, planting and feeling as if to make certain that the older man was real. He felt the stubble and the beard on Robby's cheeks and jawline, fingers ghosting further back until they tangled in the man's hair.

"You're acting like I'm gonna slip between your fingers. Like a fish," Robby whispered.

"I'm just nervous," Dennis spoke with pathetic honesty.

Robby swallowed. Then, he offered a little transparency, saying, "...I am, too."

That mutual understanding gave Dennis just enough confidence to dip his head down, initiating the kiss. He pushed everything else out of his mind: God, his family, his future. None of it mattered, for just as long as his lips danced clumsily along Robby's own.

Robby reciprocated the kiss tenderly, sliding his hands over Dennis' hips again to ground him as they warmed up to this horrible idea.

And once it really began, they warmed up fast.

Dennis melted in Robby's lap, being guided with each pressed kiss, with each fleshy grab of his pert backside. He nearly flinched feeling the man's tongue swipe against his lips, but opened enough to invite it inside to explore. As the kiss deepened, a fire caught in Dennis' loins, feeling Robby drive his hips upward, rutting against him, eliciting a droning growl from the older man with each moment of friction. It wasn't long before he could feel the hardening manhood inside Robby's jeans as it ground against him. He could only imagine how it must've ached.

Sticky clicks and heated, strained breaths filled the room as they tasted one another, and the only real break they had came a handful of minutes after they'd started. Robby pulled back first, raking his fingers through Dennis' hairline and grabbing a tuft of hair, pulling until the boy's chin was tilted upward, neck on full display. He whined quietly as the man sunk his teeth into the soft, warm flesh.

"Tell me where you feel it," he mumbled, lips smushed into Dennis' neck.

"Ah—" the boy hissed. "Left carotid triangle."

"Good boy," he growled in praise, soothing each bite with his tongue, then tugging the younger man's hair so that the other side of his neck was on display. As he bit a new spot teasingly, he hooked his fingers in the waistband of Dennis' sweats and pulled him down harder, rutting into him with a new intensity—watching every twitch in his face.

"...Sternocleidomastoid," he barely managed to sound out the word through whimpers.

Robby chuckled into the skin as he crooned, "You've pronounced it better."

"I wasn't being manhandled before," he defended.

"Is that what you call this?"

"What would *you* call it?"

"A bad idea," Robby admitted, then let go of Dennis' hair to press the pad of his index finger onto the boy's bottom lip. "Open."

"If it's a bad idea, then—"

"Just open your mouth, Whitaker."

Dennis obeyed, parting his lips just enough for Robby to push his finger inside and press down on his tongue. The boy caught on pretty quick, wrapping his lips around the digit and sucking down to his knuckle. He could've sworn the moment his lips pressed against the base of the finger, Robby damn-near snarled, nostrils flaring as he watched.

"Pardon the vulgarity—how many men have you done this with?"

Dennis pulled himself away from Robby's spit-wetted finger, wiping his lips with the back of his hand as he shook his head. "I've never had sex."

"Then I guess we're *both* new at exploring a man's body," Robby quipped. The comment was oddly endearing to Dennis, who - until that point - was so nervous his heart had nearly dropped out of his chest.

His cheeks were flushed red, just like the blazing, tingling tips of his ears. His eyes met Robby's—the man looked so very hungry. Before he could take in that look on his face any longer, the doctor pressed two fingers against his lips: index and middle.

"You've got a thing for fingers?" Dennis cocked an eyebrow, speaking against the pads of Robby's.

"I think I just enjoy watching you suck on them," the man professed with hitched breath.

Without hesitation, Dennis took the two fingers into his mouth, feeling as they pressed harder on his tongue. That in itself was fine, and it was clearly doing unimaginable things to Robby, but when the fingers slid toward the back of his tongue, the gag reflex kicked in. Dennis winced, clenching his fists against the sweater on Robby's back as he coughed. The older man was quick to slide his fingers out, leaving a thin trail of spit to hang from Dennis' chin as he hid his face in Robby's neck.

"It's not embarrassing," Robby cooed, sliding his hand underneath Dennis' sweater and rubbing his back. "We're learning our limits."

"What about yours?"

"Oh, I'm *learning,"* Robby snorted, pressing kisses just next to Dennis' earlobe before gently pulling him back off his neck, just enough to study his face. "Do you feel this?" He rutted up against the younger man, watching every little twitch in his face.

Dennis nodded shyly.

"I'd like to watch you suck it."

"I'd be no good at that."

"You'll be no good at anything your first time."

"What if you hate it?"

"What if I like it?"

What if Robby loved it? Feeling Dennis pull pleasure from the man with only his mouth? What if Dennis could truly wrap the doctor around his finger like he'd so vividly imagined doing when they'd first met two years prior. It seemed like a distant memory now, but there was a time when Dennis would have probably killed to be sitting where he was sitting now—in Michael Robinavitch's lap, being sucked and bitten at.

"It's like our lessons, hm?" Robby compared. "You're learning to perform the procedure. No book-knowledge will teach you like the real thing, Whitaker."

"That's medicine. This is—"

"Pleasure," Robby nodded. "Only if you want it." His voice lowered as he asked, "Do you want it?"

Dennis stared for a moment, then nodded slowly. His eyelids hung low as lust poured from his pupils, and he slid out of Robby's lap, carefully onto his knees just between the man's legs as he leaned back into the couch. He watched as the man's hands reached for his belt, metal clacking as he undid the latch and pulled it apart, followed by the distinctly tantalizing noise of his front zipper dragging down. When that was done, he lifted his lower half just enough to tug his jeans down to his knees, leaving his plaid boxers on display. Dennis' eyes trailed up the man's hairy thighs, basking in the musk and warmth radiating from his lower half, which the younger man was now dangerously close to.

Robby watched him from his seat on the couch with a kind of focus Dennis had never seen. The man was practically begging to be touched—begging with his eyes. Begging like a man who'd kill to feel what he was about to feel.

Without another word, Dennis leaned forward, resting his cheek on Robby's inner thigh, nose pressing against the bulging manhood underneath his boxers. He inhaled sharply as the older man's firm hand met the back of his head, tugging him forward until he was practically smothered in his crotch. Dennis planted his hands on the couch outside either side of Robby's thighs, then - like a fool, unsure what precisely to do - began lapping his tongue over the fabric.

Too focused on wetting the heat between the older man's legs, Dennis didn't notice until the smoke hit his nose—Robby had lit a cigarette, taking a drag just as Dennis looked up at him. The man audibly groaned seeing those beady, lustful eyes searching for orders, idle at his crotch.

"Take it out," Robby guided softly with his words, each one pushing smoke further into Dennis' face.

The younger man obeyed, fishing out Robby's erection from the fly of his boxers. He tried taming his reaction, but seeing another man's cock for the first time - outside of a pornographic magazine, of course - wasn't an unsurprising event. Dennis noted that Robby's was definitely a little larger than his—thicker too. But he didn't allow himself to think about

that for longer than a second; he didn't want to get caught up and lose the tempo he'd been able to establish.

"Would you like me to guide you?" Robby offered, reaching his free hand down to pinch Dennis' chin with his thumb and index finger.

The boy tilted his head up toward the doctor as he took another drag, mustering a strained, "Yes sir."

"Open."

He let his hand fall from the Dennis' chin, grabbing the base of his cock and guiding the tip to press against his bottom lip.

When Dennis opened, the older man's touch became tender—became gentle. It was as though he switched gears so as not to scare Dennis off, but yet a look of fascination still painted his face. He'd never been with a man, and the excitement of watching those kiss-swollen lips wrap around his cock was a kind of excitement he'd never known. It became even more exciting when the boy allowed him to press him down further, inch by inch, guided by his firm hand on the back of his head.

"Look at you..." Robby spoke in awe, brows knitting together as the pleasure began spreading through his lower body like a match to gasoline.

Dennis' eyes began to water as he strained to keep his jaw slack. He'd never been intimate with anyone, but he knew well enough to keep his teeth out of the equation. As he reached his limit, just before his throat began reacting and the gag reflex began to kick in, Robby guided his head back up, and his lips dragged along the shaft before meeting the tip once again.

"Your limit's right about there, hm?"

"Mhm," Dennis hummed around the man's member, sending a jolt of pleasure into him that made him flinch.

"Jesus..." he winced, tugging Dennis' hair.

The boy pulled up for a moment, looking at Robby through watery eyes like pearls as he asked in the softest voice the other man had ever heard: "Does it feel nice?"

"You're doing so good," Robby cupped Dennis' face as he spoke, then pulled away again, leaning back into the couch. When he steeled himself, he coaxed the boy to swallow him once more. "I wish you could see how pretty you look," he muttered under his breath, barely audible.

Dennis found a rhythm. He began working himself back down as he followed every of Robby's breathy instructions, lips dragging down the shaft as he hollowed his cheeks out, then dragging back up until he met Robby's tip, swirling his tongue around the head and occasionally dipping it over the urethra, which, judging by the older man's inability not to

tense up every time he did it, seemed to be a good move. The man sat and watched Dennis do that to him until his cigarette had burned nearly to the butt, and his groans of primal pleasure never once dulled in that time.

"Whitaker," he moaned, hardly able to hold on any longer.

Dennis must've sensed it, too, because he picked up speed, even figuring out how to use his own hand to pump the base of Robby's cock—the part his gag reflex would not allow him to reach.

"Whitaker," Robby said, more frantically this time.

Dennis wasn't listening, too focused on the sweltering heat of nicotine, musk, and untamed lust radiating from the older man's body. Too focused on his warmth. Too focused on the immense pleasure he derived from making the man writhe like this.

"Whitaker, I'm gonna—" Robby seethed, tugging hard on Dennis' hair.

Before he could finish the sentence, waves of hot, blinding euphoria crashed through his body. Dennis flinched as the hot ropes of seed spilled into his mouth, but determination possessed him; he sank down as far as he could on Robby's aching cock, allowing it all. He did not want to miss any piece of this. The smell, the feeling, the sounds, the taste. Dennis Whitaker was enthralled by Michael Robinavitch. He was utterly captivated by the man who had convinced him to fall to his knees. He was a moth led to the flame, unable to imagine a world in which he would not fly straight in just to feel the warmth even for a fleeting second.

Dennis Whitaker, for the first time in his life, knew what it was like to be sated of a hunger he'd never again escape.

Chapter End Notes

Oh wow, that escalated quickly.

We're officially halfway through the story! I've SO enjoyed seeing how you guys have enjoyed The Overs, and I'm really excited to see what you think as we get into the second half of it all. Love you, and have a great week! See you in 7 days!

Massive thank you to my best friend Lee for beta reading all of these chapters, including this week's chapter. <3

Chapter 7: Hey, Who Really Cares

Chapter Summary

Robby navigates new feelings and deflects personal conversations. Dennis finds an unwelcome visitor at his house on New Year's Day.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 7's song is "Hey, Who Really Cares" by Linda Perhacs on her 1970 album, "Parallelograms"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Every safe chance that arose, Dennis stole a glance over at Robby from across his dining table. The savory scent of corn casserole in the hot cast-iron skillet did not distract him, nor did the sweet air of steaming dinner rolls, perched in a brown woven basket as Dana's youngest daughter stood on her tip-toes to grab one with all her little height.

"Maggie Evans, get your hands out of there," Dana scolded, "hooligan!"

Heather glanced at the commotion with a soft smile on her lips as she plucked the untouched roll from her own plate and held it out for the little girl. "She can have mine if she's still hungry, Miss Evans."

Dana sighed, sipping at the red and white can of Budweiser that Robby had offered her. "What do you say?" She asked the youngest of her daughters, whose teeth had already sunk into the roll.

The child, through her comically large bite of bread, muffled a thank you to Heather as she looked up. She liked looking into Heather's warm, brown eyes; there was a kind of inviting, maternal flame in them that anyone could see. When Maggie trotted off to sit with her sister in Robby's living room, Heather glanced over at her own siblings, who sat rigid on the couch, plates rested on their knees as they chowed away like they hadn't eaten in weeks.

"Law, Vinny. Have a little decency, you two," she crossed her arms, forcing a huff from the youngest brother.

"Vinny's plate's just about clean! Get onto *him*— not me."

The eldest brother glanced at Lawrence with slack eyelids and a shake of his head. "Actin' like this isn't your second plate—"

"—There's more than enough to go around," Dana assured in her interruption. "You boys eat as much as you can fit, hm?" She turned in her seat to glance at them with a nod.

"This," Robby spoke with his mouth covered, pointing his accusatory fork into the meatloaf on his plate, "is phenomenal, Dana."

She nudged her head at her husband, who stood across the kitchen, plopping servings of each dish onto his plate. "That was all Adam. Even tweaked the recipe just for you."

"It wasn't hard," Adam assured to Robby as he walked by with a plate full of food, finding a seat in the living room next to his daughters. "Scooch over, Elena. Make some room," he spoke softly, then looked back at Robby and said: "We've gotta share the recipe with you if you really like it."

"I'd appreciate that." Robby looked over at Dennis, who was already staring at him. "Good food?"

Dennis nodded, finally tearing his eyes off of Robby to finish off his plate full of corn casserole, steamed cabbage, mac and cheese, and deviled eggs. Each scrape of his fork added to the cacophony of silverware clanking on porcelain plates, both in the kitchen and the living room.

It was New Year's Eve, and 1961 - as quickly and hectic as it had come - was nearly passed. Heather had no trouble convincing Law to show up for the dinner, but her eldest brother, Vincent, was a tougher time. The man, in fairness, had never met any of the people he now shared a room and food with, nor had his life up to this point given him reason to believe such an idea would be smart. But he'd have followed Heather anywhere if only to protect her. It was his pleasant surprise to find that Robby, Dennis, and Dana - as well as her lively little family - were not only welcoming, but accommodating, too.

Filling the silence in the living room, Adam cleared his throat. "Vincent, I heard you've got a job at an automobile manufacturer?"

"General Motors," the man confirmed with a nod of his head as he swallowed a bite. "Just outside of Nashville."

"That's real wicked! You like the place any?"

"Beats farm work," he snorted, slapping Law's forearm with the back of his hand.

"Kiss my ass," Law quipped, then slapped his palm over his mouth, looking wide-eyed at the little girls he'd just cursed in front of.

"They've heard a hell of a lot worse, kid," Dana remarked from her seat at the dining table.

"Their mother's got a sailor's mouth," Adam chuckled.

"She says *'fuck'!"* Elena, the eldest of the two daughters blurted.

All at once, every soul in the kitchen and the living room burst into a fit of cackling—all but Dana herself, who slumped in her chair with palms over her reddening face.

"Elena Margaret Evans!"

"No, no, sweetie. We don't *say* those words," Adam softly parented, then looked back up at Vincent to quickly switch subjects: "So how'd you get into this job, Vincent?"

Calming down from his own snickering, Vincent composed himself.

"It's been a few years in the making, I guess."

"Oh yeah? That must've been a hell of a journey."

"And was. Wouldn't have even landed this position if I didn't visit relatives in Knoxville."

"Knoxville?" Adam's mouth split into a grin as he glanced at Dana.

"Yeah, it was all chance. Knew a guy who knew a guy, kind of thing."

"What a small world! Dana *just* got accepted to nursing school in Knoxville—"

"—Adam!"

Robby, Dennis, and Heather exchanged glances, then studied Dana, who was now even redder—impossibly so.

"Accepted?" Heather couldn't hold back the smirk that pulled at her lips.

"...I only got the letter in the mail *today.* I wasn't tryin' to keep it a secret or anything."

"Dana," Heather shook her head. "This is amazing news! What are you on about?"

She leaned into the table, gaze boring holes into the blond woman whose face was beet red, hiding from the watchful eyes all around her. Dennis' face was unsure what expression to take on. His brows twitched, but he tried mustering a smile; only Robby noticed the complicated reaction from the boy.

"Jumped on the high-wire and stuck the landing," Robby finally offered, forcing a smile on his own face.

"Oh hush it, Robby," Dana swatted with her hand.

"I'm real proud of you," Dennis muttered, and Dana reached over to ruffle his dirty bangs.

That physical contact felt like impending doom for Dennis; it wouldn't be too far in the future that Dana Evans would no longer ruffle his hair in place of a 'thank you.' It wouldn't be too much longer that her voice would be but a visit in his dreams, if he were lucky enough to dream of a time when he felt he had a family. He kept himself well contained at the table,

though. It was easy to keep that crushing weight under wraps when so many others filled the room—easy to keep it drowned out by the cheer of New Year's Eve.

Easy to keep himself together with Robby's hand rested on his knee under the table, thumb running soothing circles over it. An acknowledgment of his sorrow, the older man's touch grounded him enough to present one more proud smile at Dana before they broke eye contact.

"Yeah, they, uh..." she sighed. "They sent the acceptance letter this morning. Startin' in the fall of '62."

"That's gonna be you someday, too, Heather!" Lawrence called from the living room.

"Nursing school isn't *med school,* Law."

"Same sorta thing! Same... area?"

"Eat your damn mac n cheese," Heather chuckled with a hand over her mouth, pointing at Law's plate.

"Kid's right," Dana placed her palm on the edge of the dining table just next to Heather. "You get into med school anytime soon and you'll be unstoppable, girl. You'll make history."

"I don't think..."

Dennis interrupted Heather: "If anyone can, it'd be you, Miss Collins."

She looked over at the boy. His eyes were tired much like his meek voice, but he leaned into the table with a kind of eagerness to participate in the conversation.

"You've been runnin' circles around me for a whole year now. I dare say you've been runnin' circles around Dr. Robby, *too,* sometimes!"

"Mr. Whitaker," Heather rolled her eyes, trying to swallow her smile.

"I'm serious!" Dennis turned back in his seat, speaking to Heather's siblings in the living room: "Me and her run medical hypotheticals all the time with Dr. Robby. It's real complicated stuff, and it's still taking me hours every day to really digest it all. But *this girl?"* He pointed his thumb at Heather. "She's had it all in her brain since the day I met her. And she's *still* gettin' better every day."

"We've *been* known all of this!" Vincent slapped his knee, face lit with enthusiasm. "But it's real nice to see some of *y'all* finally startin' to get it, too!"

Dennis whipped his head back around. "Heather, what even got you into all this anyway? As big as you are on medical work, your parents must've had some sort of..." he trailed off, awaiting her response.

A somber silence filled the air between them, splashing throughout Robby's entire home as she notably did not respond. Her eyes fell, and so too did her smile. Immediately, Dennis

realized he probably shouldn't have asked such a question, but he did not interrupt the contemplative look forming on the woman's face. That silence lingered only a moment longer before she found it in her to look back up at him, prepared to open up.

"In a way, they *did,"* she nodded.

Dennis' brows knitted together, listening intensely.

"They, uh..." she searched for the words. When she could not find them, Heather looked over at Law and Vincent.

The eldest brother offered an approving nod so subtle that only Heather herself could see it.

"The only black doctor we'd ever known lived on Baptist Neck. We grew up - me and my brothers, *and* everyone else around - relying on that man. Dr. Jackson Parker Morris. We all called him JP. He was a real nice man—real funny man. And real sweet, too. Anyway, he passed in the fall of '58." Heather looked up, offering glances at Dana, then Robby, then Dennis, then Adam, who still sat all the way over in the living room. "No one ever knows how good something is until it's over."

Dennis' jaw clenched. He felt a weight pulling down on his shoulders as Heather continued:

"Few months later in '59, mother and father caught tuberculosis. As I've come to know," she nodded at Robby, "it would've been a real treatable problem... if every doctor we could afford hadn't turned them away."

A tear slipped down Heather's cheek. Dana leaned over with a fresh napkin, offering it to the woman. She took it, dabbing her cheekbone and sniffling as she continued.

"Throughout that summer I prayed to God every single night. I imagined how easy it could've been. *'How different this would all be if you were here, JP,'* I'd speak into my fists." She paused again, composing herself with a deep breath before hoarsely continuing: "They succumbed by the end of summer. The worst part about it all was that we couldn't even say real goodbyes. They kept themselves locked away in the bedroom the whole while. Just to keep us safe. To keep us from suffering."

Heather dabbed the napkin under her nose.

"Everyone deals with that sort of thing differently, I think," she nodded. "I wanted control. I wanted to know that I'd have the means to never suffer through watching people I loved die such a... lonely death. Ever again. Spent every dime I made in a week at the diner on Baptist Neck to take a bus into Nashville. Walked into Meharry and begged for a course, or a pile of books, *anything.* And I just... never looked back."

"Heather..." Dana's eyes had glossed with tears, makeup running down her face as she squeezed the woman's arm.

"I didn't know about all of this," Robby confessed, eyebrows raised halfway up his forehead.

"It wasn't a story I was ready to share. For a long time."

"...Grateful you *did,* though," Dennis almost whispered, and the two of them exchanged a glance. "I'm sorry I brought it—"

"I wanted to tell you," Heather assured. "I... you all have saved Law's life twice over. Given me a chance at a good, bright future, too. The least I can do is tell you how we got here."

Robby raised his red and white beer can.

"To family and friends. Hm?"

Dana smirked, wiping the last of her tears with one hand, raising her can with the other. "To Heather's big, bright future."

"And to *yours!"* Heather fired back, raising her can.

Dennis raised his own untouched can, and the four of them clanked them together. In the living room, Adam reached awkwardly over the coffee table to clank his with Vincent and Law's. They cheered softly, and the conversation ebbed back toward casual topic.

When midnight approached and Dana's girls had long since gone home with Adam, the remaining folks counted down together. They cheered together. Hugged one another. Jumped up and down with excitement at the prospects of bright futures laid out on the road ahead. 1962 had finally begun, and so too had the rest of their lives.

"You think that went well?" Robby slid past Dennis from behind, ghosting his wandering hand across the younger man's waist as he did.

"I think I need to shut the hell up from now on."

"Oh, come on, Whitaker."

He shook his head. "What was I *thinking?* Asking such a personal question to a woman who's known more struggle in her life than we'd ever—″

"—She told you *herself* that she was happy to talk about it."

"She was just being considerate."

"Heather Collins is many things, Whitaker. A suck-up isn't one of them."

Dennis shook his head as he scrubbed at another porcelain plate in Robby's sink. The idle work kept him from dwelling too terribly hard on the parts of the night that did not go as smoothly as he'd imagined they would, but he couldn't deny that all in all, it *was* a good night. Aside from:

"And then there's the Dana thing."

"The Dana thing?"

"The Dana thing!"

Robby snorted, sliding behind Dennis again, this time lingering for a moment—pressing his nose into the rat's tail on Dennis' neck. The boy noted that; goosebumps raised upon his skin, though he tried quelling his *wants*.

"You didn't expect her to get in?" Robby muttered, lips pressed on the nape of Dennis' neck.

The boy turned, leaning his back against the edge of the counter with raised eyebrows. "That's not what I mean."

Robby shuffled back a step, planting his hands on either side of the counter, gating Dennis in as he lurched forward, closer to the younger man's face.

"What *do* you mean?"

"I mean... it's just *difficult* that it's really happening. Isn't it difficult for you, too? You've known her for so long."

"...It's," Robby tried to begin, but Dennis watched in real time as the man retreated, pushing himself upright off the counter as he pulled away.

He'd always rub the back of his head with his palm, purse his lips into a tight, hollow smile, and roll his eyes as he shook his head; he did that whenever the boy asked a question that delved - presumably - too far into Robby's emotional side. It never used to frustrate him, but the closer he and Robby became, the more unreasonable it felt that the man would never properly open up to him—especially after what happened on Christmas Eve, which they hadn't since spoken about.

"You're doing that thing," Dennis sighed.

"What thing?"

"Shutting down. Closing off, I reckon."

The man shrugged like he didn't know what Dennis meant.

"It's difficult for you, too." Dennis surmised in Robby's stead.

"I didn't say it wasn't."

"But you didn't say it *was.* It's not a crime to be a little vulnerable."

No longer leaning against the counter, Dennis scurried into the living room and stopped at the coffee table, balancing three cans of beer in his left hand and a plate in his right. Robby did

not move, but he watched as one of the cans slipped from the boy's arm and thudded onto the floor, spilling from it some of the crisp liquid.

"Dammit," the boy hissed. "I'm sorry."

He hasted over to the sink, carefully placing the plate, then dumping the other two empty cans into the trash bin. As he shuffled past Robby with a wetted rag, ready to clean the spill between the kitchen and the living room, he felt a cold splatter of liquid rain across his back.

Dennis whipped his head around, eyes finding Robby's hand dipped into an untouched glass of whiskey on the counter with a cube of ice in it. Before he could protest, the man flicked another splash of the pungent, smooth liquid at him.

"Robby!" He flinched, arms reaching up to wipe at his neck. "This is my good shirt!"

The white button-down was notably stained with golden-brown splotches. Admiring his own work, Robby snickered, kissing the liquid off the sides of his fingers as he shrugged again. To Dennis, it was the older man's way of entirely deflecting the deeper conversation he was trying to have with him. Unfortunately, it worked, too. He *did* really like that shirt.

"Take it off," he spoke off-handedly through a chuckle.

Dennis blinked.

"What?"

"Take your shirt off."

The command was firm this time. Dennis' eyebrow twitched.

"I'll wash it for you," the older man elaborated.

"Am I supposed to walk home without a shirt tonight?"

"Who said you had to go home?" Robby asked nonchalantly, closing the space between himself and Dennis, reaching out and working at the buttons. "Give me your shirt."

"...Wouldn't you like to talk about what's goin' on between us before you do this again?"

"What would you like me to say, Whitaker?" Robby fidgeted with the final button, then slipped it from its hole and peeled Dennis' shirt off of him.

"I..." he tried, but the words did not come to him. So, he watched as Robby walked off with his shirt, across the living room and toward his little laundry room.

Dennis huffed through his nostrils, rubbing at the pressure on his forehead with his wrist as a tinge of embarrassment buzzed on the tips of his ears. Wet rag still in hand, he leaned down onto the floor and picked the spilled can of beer up, placing it on the edge of the dining table before returning to his knees and wiping away at the liquid on the planks.

Thousands of thoughts raced through his mind at once. He wasn't a fan of not knowing what was going through Robby's mind—about Dana, about *him,* about anything. It certainly wasn't something new; he was accustomed to not knowing, but it irked him now. Since Robby had invited him into his pants and guided him to do things Dennis never imagined doing, he felt, perhaps irrationally, like he was owed some transparency. But that was just the problem; he didn't know if this thing that had occurred on Christmas Eve actually meant anything, and Robby certainly wasn't making it any clearer. Perhaps, what he *really* needed to do was—

"You're wiping a dry floor, now," the older man's voice cut through the noise of Dennis' racing thoughts.

He felt Robby slip his fingers into his hair from behind. Dennis stopped working at the floor, heart fluttering as he swallowed the frustration in his throat. He wanted so desperately to be upset with Robby for leaving him in the dark, but when he turned his head to find the man's crotch leveled with his eyes, all of that fire was snuffed—replaced by the heat radiating off the older man's body. A heat that kindled within Dennis that familiar urge. The *hunger.*

On his knees, Dennis tilted his head, staring up at Robby through his lashes while the man stood so very dangerously close to him. The hanging kitchen light made him squint; it was like looking up at the sun, or at God. Only Robby was, at least tonight, much more persuasive than God.

"You're a real stunner, Whitaker," the man said in his low, sultry voice, fingers still tangled in the boy's short hair.

Too afraid to speak—too afraid to snuff the flame, Dennis spoke instead with his actions. He slowly pressed his nose into the rough fabric of Robby's jeans, right into his crotch. He noticed the faint metallic scent of brass from the zipper of the man's jeans, inhaling deep and slow as Robby's hand pressed him in harder.

"Would you like to get cozy tonight?"

Dennis did not respond immediately. He reached his hand up, clutching at Robby's waistband for balance as he exhaled.

"Fine," the boy resigned in a near-whisper, like he didn't want to give in, but couldn't resist.

"I didn't catch that," Robby stated, and he meant it.

"Yes, *sir."* Dennis spoke with less hesitation this time.

The older man's brows furrowed. Hearing that plea shot a hot wave of lust straight from his heart down into his cock. He peeled himself away from Dennis, scooting one of the dining room chairs over and plopping himself down in it, spreading his legs and patting his inner thigh. It was a sign for Dennis to come over.

And come, he did.

Dennis crawled on hands and knees until he found himself between the older man's legs, hastily undoing the clanking buckle of his belt, unzipping his jeans. Robby lifted his ass just enough to allow the boy to shuck his jeans and his boxers down to his ankles, letting out a strained groan as Dennis exhaled warm air right over his balls. Neither man wasted any time getting to work: Dennis with his lips wrapped around the head, Robby with his hands in the younger man's short hair like reins.

The tempo was found quick this time; Dennis bobbed up and down, wetting every inch of Robby that he could without gagging, and Robby himself leaned into the creaking backside of the chair, soaking in the view. Watching Whitaker swallow him so eagerly lit a fire inside the older man that he'd never in his life experienced—a fire that no wild dream of his had ever come close to igniting. He loved seeing Dennis' nose bury itself into the thatch of dark hair at the base of his cock, lingering each time it happened. It wasn't even the physical pleasure itself that sent him into his lustful frenzy, either. Dennis Whitaker wasn't particularly standout at this job, but the fact that it was *him* was enough for Robby. The fact it was Dennis Whitaker was what drove the man mad.

"Oh, Jesus..." Robby sighed, losing control of his patience as he began rutting upward.

It didn't take many more bobs of the boy's head before Robby had fully overridden his tempo; he tightened his grip on Dennis' hair, fucking up into his throat with a new intensity that drew heat from his loins. For his part, Dennis tried his hardest to keep himself down while feeling the intense sensation of being choked in such a way, but his reflexes took hold. He let out a rough gag, one just desperate enough to snap Robby out of his trance. The older man let up as Dennis pulled back, coughing and wiping pools of spit from his lips.

His eyes were red and glossy, full of lust and intent. His cheeks were cherry-red. Robby drank up the sight indulgently before speaking:

"Sorry."

Dennis shook his head, wiping his wetted lips once more with the back of his hand. From the corner of his eye, spit dripped from the head of Robby's cock. Before thought could rationalize, he leaned forward, licking that drip up until his tongue grazed the head—as if to assure he was ready for more. The action forced a twitch from Robby's cock. He hadn't expected Dennis to take charge in such a way, but was pleasantly surprised.

All the older man could do was stare. With his brown eyes, he bore holes into the younger man, who sat in front of him on his knees so obediently, hungry for anything and everything Robby could offer him. Dirty, too-far-gone thoughts flooded Robby's mind, and his eyes lit with enthusiasm as the corners of his lips lifted.

"What?" Dennis asked, watching as the older man's contemplative face studied him.

Robby did not immediately respond. That silence drove an itch into the boy's brain. He felt himself becoming more and more antsy, sitting like a fool on his hands and knees, watching as Robby ate him alive with nothing more than his lustful eyes.

"Dr. Robby," he tried again. *"What?"*

By that point, Robby was holding back a chuckle, covering his mouth with his hand, cock still standing upright as he looked the shirtless boy up and down. Realizing he was beginning to genuinely try Dennis' nearly limitless patience, Robby stood from his chair, pulling his pants up lazily and grabbing the younger man's chin between his thumb and index finger. He tilted the boy's head up to look at him.

"Stay right where you are, Whitaker."

The command, as quiet and low as it was, sent a shiver down Dennis' spine. He slumped, frozen on the floor as Robby walked off. Somewhere behind him, the boy could hear a door open, then close. The silence in the kitchen was deafening. It was then, and *only* then, that he finally noticed how tight his own jeans had become, erection straining desperately against them. He palmed the spot for a moment, then stopped himself, trying to swallow down the lust within him which had begun spiraling out of control.

But before he could convince himself to get up and think straight, the door opened behind him again. As Robby passed him, he dropped a tube on the floor. Dennis glanced down, reading *'K-Y Jelly,'* then glanced back up at Robby, who had a lit cigarette in his mouth, pouring a new glass of whiskey at the kitchen counter.

"Medical grade," Robby spoke through teeth clenched around the butt of his smoke. "Had to smuggle a new tube from the clinic." He perched his cig between his index and middle finger, using his other fingers to hold the glass of whiskey as he found his seat in front of Dennis once more.

The older man took a swig of the smooth liquid, then a drag of his cigarette, before pointing at the tube of medical lube next to Dennis.

"I'd like to watch you touch yourself, Whitaker."

The boy glanced down at the tube again, then back at Robby—incredulously.

"You want me to..."

"Finger yourself, yes. I want to watch you open yourself up. The anal muscles can stretch and —"

"—I'm aware of how it works. I've just never," he stammered nervously, *"done* that before."

"Shall we learn together?"

Dennis' heart pounded like the booming thumps of a racehorse. He looked Robby up and down; the man hadn't even properly zipped his jeans back up, but he leaned back in the chair, palming his erection through the rough fabric as he waited patiently for Dennis to oblige him.

And so, the younger man did just that.

Slowly and timidly, Dennis unlatched the buckle of his own belt, pulling it apart before unzipping his jeans and unclicking the button. Each move he made, he looked up to Robby for approval, catching the man taking swigs of his whiskey or drags of his smoke. The smell

that filled the air was as dirty as it was intoxicating. Dennis could feel the thrum of lust banging against his skull as he stripped himself completely bare, erection slapping onto his stomach as he carefully set his pants aside.

Robby barely held back a groan into his whiskey glass as his eyes ravaged Dennis' bare figure.

The boy opened his legs nervously, grabbing the tube of K-Y Jelly and unscrewing the cap.

"I look like a fool," he shuddered, squeezing the cold lubricant into his palm.

"You don't."

Shyly and slowly, Dennis leaned back, presenting himself for Robby. He let the liquid drip from his palm onto his perineum, and from there it glided slowly down over his hole. He visibly shuddered feeling the cold substance invade him so. It was even odder to know that the older man was watching every single movement of his lower half, every part of him uncovered. He could not hide from Michael Robinavitch. But he did not want to.

The older man watched for several minutes as Dennis warmed up to the situation. He began slow, circling his hole with the pad of his index finger, before finally dipping it in, if only barely. He clenched around the intrusion, trying to assess the foreign feeling as his lips parted and a soft whimper slipped out.

"That's it," Robby responded to the sweet noise.

Hearing the man groan from his seat, Dennis slowly worked his index finger in, exploring the hot walls inside himself as he, involuntarily, let out variations of that same, soft, sweet sound. His feet rose higher in the air as the last of his index sank in, all the way to the knuckle. For a minute, he sat still like that, eyes focused on Robby's hungering figure while he squeezed around the digit.

"Try a second finger," Robby softly commanded.

Dennis obeyed, slipping his middle finger past the tantalizing ring of muscle Robby's eyes were so fixated on. The older man took a particularly long drag of his cigarette, blowing smoke toward the boy on his floor as he watched him writhe under his own touch. The deeper his middle finger intruded into himself, the louder his whimpers became. That paired nicely with the wet, lewd sounds his digits were making inside of him—it was all music to Robby's ears.

"Does it feel real good?"

"Mostly," Dennis shuddered through a whine.

"Mostly? Talk to me, baby."

The younger man's head flung back, pressing into the hard floor as he winced through the pleasure of his own finger sliding past his prostate. When the overwhelming sensation

finished wracking through his body, he lifted his head back up to meet eyes with Robby, whimpering: "The floor kinda hurts."

The older man snorted.

"We can't have that."

He tossed the last sip of whiskey to the back of his throat, slamming the glass onto the dining table and cramming the lit end of his cigarette into it. As he stood to his feet, the chair scooted backward, and he hooked his fingers into the belt loops on his jeans before clearing his throat.

"Come here, Whitaker."

Dennis audibly moaned pulling his fingers out of his hole, the sensation sending shudders of *need* through his body. Clumsily, he scurried to his feet, standing only inches from Robby as a cold trail of the lubricant dripped from his hole and toward his inner thigh.

"Let's get you comfortable, hm?" Robby crooned, grazing his thumb over Dennis' earlobe and searching his eyes. He let his other hand trail down the younger man's jawline until he caught his chin between an index finger and thumb again—Robby's favorite little motion.

"Did you like it? Watching me?"

"Very much so," Robby hummed, dropping his hand over Dennis' and guiding it until it groped at the erection straining against his jeans. "Does it feel like I liked it?"

"Very much so," Dennis mocked, squeezing at the man's bulge just enough to elicit a sharp inhale.

"Oh, you're warming up a bit, *hm?"*

"You're the one drinking."

Robby guided Dennis backward, hands on the younger man's waist as he walked him slowly into his bedroom.

"I'm still myself."

"Didn't offer me any."

"First you eat all my food, now you want my liquor?"

"You *give* me the food," Dennis corrected timidly as Robby pushed him onto the edge of the bed.

"I'm just yanking your chain, Whitaker," he pinched the younger man's earlobe teasingly before pulling away. "Would you like a glass?"

With a playful little smile on his face, Dennis shook his head.

Robby snorted, then commanded: "Get on your back."

That command sent his heartbeat into another race. His playful moment had given him a sense of control back, but Dennis felt most alive when *Robby* was the one in control—was the one guiding him. Obeying swiftly, the boy leaned until his back was to the mattress, eyes fixating on the dark ceiling above him as the sounds of fabric rustled somewhere in front of him. Distinctly, he could picture Robby fishing his cock out of his jeans, but what he felt next betrayed his imagination.

Robby pressed warm, sweet kisses into Dennis' ankle as he lifted the younger man's legs up, leaning his knee into the bed to reach lower. The kisses trailed from that ankle up to Dennis' calf, then behind his knee. Slowly—agonizingly slowly, Robby's trail of kisses led up into Dennis' inner thigh. As the older man got closer and closer to the heat between his legs, Dennis clutched at the thick comforter on the bed with balled fists, trying to ground himself. His breaths became shallow as sweet whimpers threatened to spill from his lips, and Robby certainly heard him try to silence himself.

"Let me hear you," he practically *begged* to the younger man.

Dennis allowed a single hitched sigh to escape his throat as Robby pressed his lips onto the bone of his hip, trailing up his abdomen, into his sternum, and then over his nipple. His trail did not stop there, though; he continued upward until he was nibbling little bites into the soft flesh of Dennis' neck. That was where he *really* lost it—whimpers betrayed him, and his arms wrapped around Robby's notably clothed back.

"Please," he hardly knew what he was begging for.

Robby began trailing back down, all the way down the younger man's body until he was between his legs again, this time dangerously close to his hole. The older man planted daring kisses and took salacious nibbles of flesh just past his lover's taint, pulling forth visceral shudders and writhed pleasure from his squirming, bare figure. It was only when Robby finally pulled away that Dennis' mind stopped spinning so violently, but even then, the older man wasn't nearly done.

"Tell me something, Dennis Whitaker."

"Yes?" The boy panted, struggling to swallow as dry as his mouth had become.

"Have you ever thought about what I'd feel like inside of you?"

It was a genuine question—Dennis could tell. There was no grand intent to sound flirtatious or daring, but coming from Robby's mouth, it was a question that nearly stopped the younger man's heart. He did not, of course, respond, too busy wrapping his mind around such a sentence having left the doctor's lips.

In that silence, Robby leaned over Dennis until those same lips were sucking into the sensitive skin of his neck again, rutting his cock against the younger man's own. The pressure on separate regions of his body sent him into a state of overwhelming need, and so, from his sweet lips, Dennis Whitaker whined:

"I have."

"Yes?"

"Yes!"

"You have?"

"I've thought of it—" his breath hitched as Robby pressed a row of kisses down his jawline. "A few times."

"Oh-hoh, a *few,* huh?"

Dennis nodded against Robby's hungering lips.

When the man finally pulled back, just enough to hover above Dennis and meet eyes with him, he asked: "Would you have me inside of you right now?"

Reduced to a writhing mess in the older man's bed, Dennis nodded.

Without hesitation, Robby fished the condom he'd brought up from the clinic out of the pocket of his half-stripped pants. He carefully tore open the foil, tugging out the latex protection and sheathing it over his cock. He wasted no time lining himself up at Dennis' warm, inviting hole, but did not immediately press in. He planted his right arm beside the younger man's head, trailing his left hand downward. Leaning in to capture his lips in a wet, hungry kiss, Robby's left hand spread the younger man's hole enough to ease himself past the tight ring of muscle. He pulled away from the kiss *only* so that his eyes could dart over every inch of Dennis' face, analyzing as his expression contorted into one of discomfort.

"Is that okay?"

Dennis did not verbally respond, but he nodded through the wince in his eyes, swallowing between panted breaths.

When finally he buried himself to the hilt inside of Dennis, Robby clenched his jaw, grunting low and gravelly into the younger man's ear as he fell on top of him. His left hand ghosted back up to cup behind Dennis' ear, rubbing soothing circles into the boy's cheek with his thumb. He felt the younger man clutch at the back of his shirt with both hands—felt Dennis squeeze around him, unable to relax himself. He whined into Robby's ear, eyebrow dragging against the damp skin of the older man's cheekbone.

"I've got you," Robby cooed. "I've got you." He raked his fingers through the curly strands of Dennis' hair as he hummed, trying to keep himself still despite the unfathomable pleasure of a tight hole swallowing his manhood. He wouldn't allow himself to pressure Dennis any more than necessary, and would wait until the younger man had time to settle into the feeling.

They may both have been new to it, but Robby had more than enough anatomical knowledge to imagine how uncomfortable it must've felt for Dennis in that moment.

"I've got you," he whispered a third time, counting each of Dennis' strained pants of breath as the hot air tickled his ear.

Robby buried his nose into Dennis' neck, inhaling deep before pressing a soft kiss and mumbling, "I'm going to move, alright?"

He felt Dennis nod against him.

Slowly, the older man pulled back until he was nearly entirely unsheathed, then pressed back in again, feeling waves of intense pleasure crash up his body as his cock opened Dennis up further. *Feeling* that—feeling himself be split open by another man sent Dennis into a trance like he was in orbit. With each gradually quickened press of Robby's hips into him, the nigh-unbearable discomfort that initially screamed at him began to melt into an intense, addictive sensation.

Robby's movements began evolving into thrusts of unabashed need, and Dennis wrapped his legs around the older man's waist. He felt each hot, sticky breath from Robby catch on his neck, and his hand ghosted up the nape of the older man's own, into his hair. He rubbed circles into the Robby's scalp, which seemed sign enough that he was well enough to take more, because Robby began *truly* pressing the younger man into the mattress. His thrusts frequently changed pace, and every so often he'd drill especially deep inside of Dennis, until finally, a guttural whine spilled involuntarily from the receiving man's throat.

"Fuck, Dennis," Robby nearly growled into his lover's neck as he felt spurts of hot seed against his abdomen—he'd just made the boy spill himself without ever having touched his cock.

A strained, hoarse whine dragged out long and tantalizing from between Dennis' lips as he rode through his climax, still utterly impaled by Robby, who by that point had become almost primal. Each time he felt himself squeeze around the older man, each time he was fucked deeper into, Dennis strayed further from reality. The mix of pain, pleasure, and friction ran through every bone in him like a golden heat from Heaven itself. With his body, he was providing Robby an experience that was, judging by sound alone, undeniably intense. Every thrust was met with a gravelly, dark grunt, like he'd devolved into an animal. Yet he hid himself, nose buried in Dennis' neck, like he was shy to be driving himself so hungrily into him—like he was unable to face the man whose sweet fruits he'd selfishly taken as his for the first time.

Dennis tugged gently on tufts of hair at the back of Robby's head until the man pulled away from his neck, hovering just far enough over him to meet his eyes. His face glistened with sweat and flush. His brows were knitted into a frown and his nose scrunched above parted lips which sweet huffs of air escaped from so desperately.

Robby had come entirely undone, and it was the first time Dennis Whitaker had ever been able to witness it. He did this. *He* made Michael Robinavitch this way.

Looking into Dennis' lust-ridden eyes sent the older man over the edge, and before he could let out more than an "Oh, *fuck*," seed spilled from his cock and into the condom. He let himself have one final, deep thrust, until he'd sunk himself to the hilt once again, hips flush

against Dennis' ass. A deep growl bubbled forth from his throat as he winced, and he collapsed gently over the younger man, a panting mess.

They laid like that on the edge of Robby's bed for several minutes. Robby melted under Dennis' touch—the way his fingers massaged into the older man's scalp, trailing down the nape of his neck and over his spine, then back up. Robby himself kept pressing little lazy kisses just under the younger man's jaw, basking in the smell of sex and smoke and *Dennis Whitaker*.

"You called me Dennis," the younger man hummed, pressing a kiss into Robby's temple.

"What about it?"

"You've never done that before."

"Surely I have?"

"Nope."

"Hm. Should I do it more often?"

"I'd like that." He paused, then added timidly: "A lot."

Finally, Dennis began shimmying himself from under Robby, his own bare body dragging rough against the older man's jeans and itchy plaid shirt.

"I've gotta get home," he sighed.

"It's almost three in the morning. You might as well stay the night," Robby tried.

"I've got the afternoon shift tomorrow. And I don't have clean clothes."

"Wear mine."

"We're not the same size," Dennis chuckled.

Robby sighed, defeated.

"Will you let me clean you up, first? Don't need you running home with lubricant coming out of here," he pinched the cheek of Dennis' ass, and the younger man swatted jokingly in response.

He turned to face the older man, who still lay defeated on his stomach at the edge of the bed. "Well, I'm certainly no stranger to your tub."

It was a good joke—good enough to make Robby smile as he pushed himself to his feet, stripping bare and following behind Dennis into the bathroom.

"I'm going to drive you home, too."

"Deal."

After their bergamot bath, Robby convinced Dennis to wear a fresh pair of his own clothes, despite how awkwardly they fit on the shorter man. The sweats dragged at his ankles, and the neck of the sweater hung distractingly low on his collarbones.

"Just bring them back here before you start your shift tomorrow," the older man had said. "It's not a big deal."

The drive to Dennis' humble little home was quiet, but not awkwardly so. The air around Robby never felt so still—he'd never looked so content. At least not in Dennis' eyes, which were firmly fixated on him from the moment they got in the car. The quiet that sat between them on that night was one of satisfaction, one that signified they may no longer have needed to speak in the other's company—the company itself was enough.

As Robby turned, yanking the wheel so that the car rolled into the dirt and gravel driveway, the headlights lit up the front door, and the woman who sat with her knees huddled to her chest just beside it.

"Who the hell..." the older man whispered cautiously, slowing the car to a halt, a safe distance from Dennis' front porch.

Dennis looked up and out the windshield, eyes straining against the bright, yellow reflection of the woman's puffy coat. His brows furrowed together, mind racing to rationalize—trying to decide who, realistically, that woman could have been. When an answer did not come, he spoke without turning to the doctor:

"I don't know—"

The woman stood to her feet, leaving her face just far enough away from the harshest point of the light, just enough for Dennis to finally process it. To finally recognize that it was his mother who stood on his front porch, swaddled in a big yellow coat with her bangs poking out of the winter toboggan snuggled onto her head.

The boy's entire demeanor changed in an instant; Robby noticed.

"Who is she?"

"Stay in the car."

Dennis slammed the passenger door shut behind him as he hopped out, cramming his hands into the comically oversized sherpa coat Robby had lent. His chunky shoes crunched in the snow, rustling gravel underneath, and his breath - visible like ghostly whisps in the cold night air, lit by the headlights of Robby's car - picked up pace. His mother's arms were already wide open, prepared for an embrace, but it did not come. Dennis stopped several feet in front of her, shuddering in the cold as his nose scrunched up.

"My baby... it's really *you,"* she choked out.

Dennis did not respond. His mother's eyes briefly glanced just over his shoulder at the car behind him, meeting Robby's gaze before looking at her son again.

"Who is that man? In the car, pumpkin. Who is he?"

The boy did not turn—eyes fixated like a hawk's on the woman standing between him and his home.

"My boss."

"Where's your boss drivin' you home from at four in the morning?"

"Why are you on my *porch* at four in the morning?"

The snappy remark visibly took the woman back. Dennis was agitated, but he wasn't cruel, so he sighed, then elaborated begrudgingly: "I work at the clinic 'round here, now. The hours are wonky sometimes, as you can imagine."

"Why's he lurkin'? It's givin' me the creeps."

Dennis shrugged. "I told him not to get out. Figured he wouldn't want to hear us arguing."

"Arguin'? We're not arguing—"

"Why are you here, mama?"

She paused.

"...I want you home." Slower, she said, "I want you to come back *home,* baby."

The boy huffed incredulously. His eyes rolled twice over as he shook his head, running his frozen fingers through his freshly-bathed, damp hair. He could already feel the pressure of tears pooling behind his eyes.

"Home," he huffed in a shivering, haunted breath.

"That's right," she cooed. "And I don't hold it against you for leavin' in the first place. Things was tough, I *understand,* baby. But runnin' away from it all won't solve the problem in the end." She paused, waiting for her son to respond. Impatiently, she filled the silence again with: "Came all this way for you. Family is everything—we're all you've got."

Dennis gnawed on the inside of his cheek, studying his mother's pale face, illuminated by Robby's headlights.

"How the hell did you find me?"

"The advertisement."

"Howell's farm," the boy seethed.

"You left it in the bin." She sniffled, rubbing her mitten-covered hands together. "I couldn't... bring myself to let it sit there, lest I one day find the God-given willpower to bring you back where you belong—figured someday I'd know I needed to come lookin' for you. I felt a callin' this winter, so I reasoned with Thane and caught the next bus to Tennessee."

"Daddy ain't a reasonable man."

"He's changin' for the *better,* Dennis," she defended.

"If he's so much better now, why isn't he here to bring me home himself?"

The woman could not answer. Her jaw clenched, brows furrowing as she searched for a way to redirect the conversation.

"...I got to Franklin and asked around Howell's farm. Was kind enough to write me your address."

"This isn't real," Dennis shook his head as the tears began to let themselves out.

The woman took a step forward, prepared to reach out her arms as she said, "Sweetie, this is —"

"No!" The volume of that shout stopped the woman in her tracks. "There isn't a *goddamned* way in the world you traveled all the way here so you could ambush me and tell me to crawl back to a place that hasn't been my home since the day I was *born."*

"Dennis Whitaker," she barked defensively.

"I've made friends here. *Good* friends. People who *feel* like a family to me. People who stick up for me—make me feel like I had a reason bein' put on this planet."

"And what about your *real* family?" Her voice was strained in a high pitch.

"The one that didn't want me?"

His mother looked genuinely hurt to hear that. Not offended, but hurt. She knew, at least deep down, that Dennis was speaking from a place of truth. She knew full-well what he'd experienced growing up—knew it because she watched it all happen and never once stepped in. She wanted so desperately to bring him home: her sweet little bee. Her baby boy. She'd waited three long years finding the courage to go out and find him herself.

But Dennis Whitaker had changed.

"The one where a mother watches her son get beaten by his father for writin' silly thoughts in a notebook? The one where she watches from her recliner while his brothers eat him like hungry sharks? Just 'cause he ain't in to the same things?" Dennis wetted his lips, pointing an accusatory finger at the woman while tears slipped down his pale, cold cheeks. "You had *twenty-three years* and countless chances to make it feel like a *'real family.'"*

"I'd give anything to do it over," she confessed.

Dennis scoffed, blinking away the stinging tears and inhaling sharp—a hitched sob.

"I'd give anything to do it over," she repeated, more conviction in it this time. "I'd raise you right—to be a *man.* I know it's my fault, I shouldn't have been so soft... turnin' you into a flimsy flower to be picked at by your brothers and your daddy—I *know* it's my fault!"

The boy grit his teeth, jaw clenching.

"But times are changing! *You're* changing! Thane is changing, the farm is changing... things can finally be better now. It's time you come *home,* my baby!"

"Mama, please," he nearly begged in his whispered voice. "Just leave."

"...No," she wept in defeat. *"No."*

As her tears fell, she jammed her mitten-covered hand into the pocket of her coat, pulling out a messy notepad with scribbles littered all over it. She'd been using it to write down any information she came across while on her trip to Franklin. That didn't seem to matter anymore, so as a final effort, she took the dull pencil from her other coat pocket and scribbled her landline phone number onto a fresh page. Tearing it from the notebook, she stepped off the porch, trying to close the distance between herself and her son.

Dennis took several steps back as he raised his voice, "Please leave."

"Please," she wept again, dragging the word out in haunting, gut-wrenching desperation. "Please, just—"

"Mama, *let me be!"* He demanded.

The slam of Robby's driver door interrupted the escalating situation. Dennis didn't need to turn around to know the man was already mere footsteps away from his mother, standing between the two of them as he attempted to diffuse the situation.

"I think it'd be good for *both* of you to let this discussion end here for tonight."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" She spat, trying to shove past him.

Robby held firmly onto her arms, keeping her from stepping any closer to Dennis.

"Ma'am, I'm Dr. Michael Robinavitch, I run a private practice here in Franklin."

"Get *off* of me!"

"Will you let this go if I do?"

"Why, so you can keep corruptin' my son with your perverted, sick self?"

That comment sent a chill down Robby's spine. His arms went limp, letting her shove past him as she glanced at Dennis - whose clothes were clearly not his own - then back to Robby.

"Oh yeah," she hissed, nodding while staring daggers into the older man. "I see exactly what's goin' on. With you and *my* son."

Her chin was tilted up, lips curled downward in disgust.

"I oughta report your damn *'private practice'* clinic to the police. Get your license revoked. Get you behind bars. You count your blessings I'm too good a mother to put my baby boy through that. You hear me?"

Robby did not respond, eyes wide like a deer in headlights. Every bone in his body refused to cooperate, save for the involuntary shiver of his limbs in the cold winter night. Dennis, too, was shivering where he stood, a few feet away from them—but his shivers were of immense emotional distress. The cold was nothing compared to the pit pulling his heart to the bottom of his chest.

"You hear me?" The woman shouted again at the unresponsive man, her voice echoing in the trees all around them.

"...Yes ma'am," he nodded begrudgingly, obeying the woman like a leashed dog for having perceived what he'd been doing with her son.

"Get out of Franklin," Dennis spoke eerily calm, turning to his mother.

"Get that man's clothes off your back, Dennis," she tried.

"Get *out* of here."

The woman stepped carefully toward Dennis—Robby notably stayed out of it this time, frozen where he stood.

She lowered her voice so that only Dennis might hear: "When he's had his fill of you, thank Jesus Christ every night you've got a mother who will still welcome you home with forgivin' arms, Dennis Whitaker." She shoved her notebook into his chest. "When you're all alone again and the Lord is the only forgivin' force around to comfort you, thank Him that you've got a mother who will still want to see you after all these... *vile* proclivities you've indulged."

The notebook fell, stabbing into the snow between Dennis' shoes as he watched his mother turn, stomping toward the street. His eyes stayed fixated on the haunting figure, lips parted as shallow breaths slipped out. Even when she'd disappeared down the street, likely headed to the next Greyhound back to Nebraska, Dennis did not move. Neither did Robby. They stood in silence, shoes buried in snow, bodies illuminated by the headlights of the older man's car, casting shadows on the front wall of the younger man's home.

"I should get back," Robby spoke, voice hoarse and strained.

Dennis shook his head. "...Please don't go."

Robby was already moving, though—already trudging through the white ground, toward his car.

"Dr. Robby," the boy pleaded.

The older man gripped the handle of the driver door with white knuckles, gritting his teeth as he turned back to glance at the boy, who stood pitifully, legs hardly holding him up anymore. His eyes lingered for a moment, then he swallowed the lump in his throat, inhaling sharply and yanking the car door open.

"I'll see you at the clinic tomorrow, Whitaker."

"Robby," he shuddered, body wracked by choked, dry sobs. *"Please."*

The door slammed shut, and all Dennis could do was watch as Robby's car pulled out of his makeshift driveway, turning and heading back down the road from which it came, disappearing into the cold winter night.

Chapter End Notes

So... actually- you know what, I'm gonna keep my mouth shut.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and please note that as we break into the final stretch of this story, I WILL be updating and adding tags. Thank you so much for your continued support on my story <3

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Post-upload art sharing:

@petyrithoe made this STEAMY art of chapter 7 Robby!

Chapter 8: Once I Was

Chapter Summary

As everything begins to change, Dennis begs for Robby's affection, further complicating a difficult dynamic.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 8's song is "Once I Was" by Tim Buckley on his 1967 album, "Goodbye And Hello"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

August 11, 1962

Mama,

I should first apologize for New Year. A lot was going on in my life at the time. Frankly, there's still a lot going on in my life. I still won't deny your arrival at my home was ill-timed, but I know you meant well, and I don't want that to sit in the space between us for the rest of our lives. It's why I'm writing now.

I want to set the record straight about Dr. Robinavitch. He's a good man. I'd like to believe he's a good man, it's what I've chosen to believe for two years. I don't imagine it's fair that should change just because of your assumptions. But I've been considering your perspective more and more since that day. Life in Franklin has felt more lonesome this year. Friends come and go, of course, but processing that is a little hard.

I think I've begun to long for Nebraskan air. Maybe I've become homesick. Maybe it's the lonely chill of autumn creeping in. Maybe it's me. Work has been very busy, and I've been feeling more isolated. I hardly know who I am right now, but I know who I want to be. I know very well—

Dennis crushed the unfinished letter in his hand, cursing under his breath and tossing it indiscriminately behind him. The crumpled ball bounced off the lampshade on his nightstand with a rattling thud, tapping softly when it landed on the floor beside his bed. Elbows propped on the work desk across the bedroom, the boy rested his head in his hands, sobbing softly as he slumped further in his chair. Tears pooled in little shimmering puddles on the wooden surface and his nose began running until he caught the rolling snot with violent sniffles. With the back of his hand, he wiped several times just at his nostrils.

Eight months had passed since the New Year's Day incident, and Robby hadn't been *remotely* the same since. The man had built up an impressive wall around himself since then. The last time Dennis could remember a real vulnerable conversation between them was back in winter, when Robby broke to him that Heather Collins wanted to stop showing up at the clinic. Of course, atop everything else, the older man's swelling infatuation for Dennis had all but died—which is what *really* left the boy aching. Robby was, truly, a hollow shell of a man working in his own clinic. Detached, isolated, robotic.

Mind trailing off, he began to replay his name coming from Robby's mouth last winter, the only times he'd ever heard *'Dennis'* from the man he so desperately—

Pushing the chair with the back of his legs as he forced himself back down to reality.

"Don't," he warned himself, biting hard on his inner lip until the faint taste of blood hit his tongue.

The heat in Franklin was like a wet, suffocating blanket that day, sun beaming down on Dennis' pale skin harshly as he stepped outside his home, work bag on his shoulder. He walked over to his sorry excuse for a new car, having proudly purchased it at the local dealership in the outskirts of town back in the spring. Dennis lugged himself into the driver seat quite like how he'd just lugged his duffel back into the back seat, starting the creaky old hunk-of-junk with the key and gripping the steering wheel.

For Dennis Whitaker, it was time to head into another long day at the clinic that had become the subject of his nightmares.

"Mama's strong," Samantha squeezed Ella Jones' hand as it lay just off the edge of the patient bed. "She *has* to pull through this, Michael."

Robby gnawed at his cheek. He already knew very well the situation that was about to unfold. Ella, having been in decline since the day he'd diagnosed her with heart failure years ago, was likely in her death bed. Room C of the Robinavitch Health Center had never felt so much like a tomb. Robby would have liked to scold Sam for not having taken Ella to a *genuine* hospital, but that was never Ella's thing, nor her daughter's. It's why they liked Robby's work—why they'd spent the last several years having the man perform home visits.

For his part, it had given the man an opportunity to settle into Franklin: Ella was a warm soul —like a mother. He'd accepted that warmth alongside the affection from Samantha while, in exchange, providing the services required to keep the elderly woman happy and - as much as could be willed - healthy *enough,* despite her disease.

The morning - and the day in general, for that matter - had already been unkind to Robby prior to Samantha's arrival with her dying mother, but he could see it in his ex-lover's eyes the moment she barged through the front door with the elderly woman slumped in her

wheelchair. That haunting look in her eyes. The look of desperation. The look that many people had given Michael Robinavitch throughout his life which screamed for help. Death had come knocking at Ella Jones' door, and Robby was the man expected to ward it off.

But it had now been nearly an hour. It was clear to him: death would not relent this day.

"I need you to wait in here again, Samantha," Robby instructed frantically.

"Are you coming right back?"

"I'm coming right back. Just grabbing that morphine for the pain. But..." he wanted to begin the conversation. That nightmarish one wherein a doctor was tasked to break to someone that their loved one did not have much time left.

But he couldn't. Not just yet.

"Thank you," she mustered, body wracked by emotion as she clutched her unresponsive mother's hand.

The doctor's brows furrowed, and he offered a polite, silent nod in place of verbal response—he didn't want his voice to quiver. The situation with Ella was hitting closer to home than he'd ever comfortably admit, but it was on top of *everything* else going on that day in the clinic. And in his mind.

The door clicked shut as he entered the hallway, but he did not immediately walk to the front and update Dana. Instead, he stood with planted feet, back facing the door, jaw clenched as he ground his teeth down, rubbing the back of his head up and down with his palm. It took longer than usual for the man to calm himself, and he nearly bent the patient clipboard with the white-knuckled grip of his free hand. When, finally, he *did* calm himself, Robby's demeanor snapped back into place like a rubber band—like he was a robot having been rebooted; he put one foot in front of the other, finding his footing and making his way back to the front of the clinic.

Triage looked busy. Dennis stood on the opposite side of the front desk from Dana, duffel still on his shoulder—he'd likely only just come in.

Robby pointedly paid little attention to the kid as he slammed the patient sheet on the table. "Pulmonary edema."

The blond woman locked eyes with the doctor, a little shocked.

"Poor girl..."

"She won't make it to sunset. She's got a lot of fluid in her lungs and she's hardly responsive—even in the best case scenario, she'll be lucky to go peacefully and painlessly."

"Gosh."

"I don't know how or *why* she didn't get here - or to a *hospital* - a hell of a lot sooner, but," Robby shook his head, digging into his inner cheek with clenched teeth, "she's not gonna

make it. And I'll have to break it to Sam, and she's just going to—"

"If you need any help, I—"

"I've got it," Robby nearly barked, jerking his arm away from the hand Dennis tried placing reassuringly. After processing the confused look from the boy and the disappointed look from Dana, Robby repeated more calmly, "I've got it."

He did not, in fact, know what he was going to do, but imagining the tenderness of Dennis' touch agitated that little warning sign flashing in the back of his brain. The one that had kept him *mostly* at arm's length from the kid for eight months now.

"Robby," Dana warned sternly. "The kid just got here. He's only trying to help."

Rather than acknowledge the warning - or his abrasive attitude - Robby only nodded, stepping away without so much as offering an apologetic glance at Dennis. The good thing about having been swamped with nightmarish tasks and cripplingly overwhelming thoughts all day was that: adding one more to the pile - in the form of an insulted and belittled Dennis Whitaker - did not hurt Robby as badly as it otherwise would've.

Or perhaps it did, and the pain just hadn't registered yet.

In any case, the doctor made his way to the back of the clinic to grab morphine. It was common to allow a patient some of it as they passed if it was going to be a relatively peaceful ordeal, but deaths weren't all that common in Robby's clinic. He was a very talented doctor, but more than that, Franklin was a small town, and he was lucky to have had a major hospital relatively nearby to redirect truly dire cases to. But *'relatively'* was not enough for Ella Jones —not in her condition. She would not have made it to Williamson in time, and even if she did, Robby knew very well there was little even a major hospital could do for the elderly woman at this point. Fingers wrapped around the morphine, he eyed a diuretic on the shelf below, imagining how useful it might've been if Ella had come in sooner.

Would've, could've should've.

Swiveling and striding back where he came from, he passed the front desk, glass ampoule of morphine secured in his clenched fist.

"Dr. Robby—"

"Not now, Whitaker," he dismissed once again, barreling down the hallway and practically slugging himself into exam room C to avoid facing the kid.

Meeting Samantha's wet-pearl eyes, Robby bit down once again on his inner cheek. He stepped over to the edge of the bed, breath shaky. The quiet of the room around betrayed him; those quivering inhales and exhales fell heavy on the weeping daughter's ears.

"Michael?" She asked.

He now bit down hard enough to draw blood from the flesh inside his cheek. It tasted of iron and stung like guilt. It was not his fault that Ella Jones was dying in his clinic, but it certainly

felt so. He'd known the woman for years, regularly visiting her—and her daughter. He'd grown fond of the two of them, even long after his fling with Samantha Jones had ended. They still cared about one another. But it made the whole situation far more pungent. He sat in his chair like God, prepared to break to the poor woman next to him that her mother, her life, her world, would soon pass. It was like he was God, declaring that another kind soul was to be taken from the world, and it stirred every other troubled whisper inside his body to do so.

"Samantha," he murmured, inhaling a sharp breath through his nose and drumming his fingers against the ampoule in his hand. "I don't believe this is something your mother will recover from. Not this time."

The woman froze, lips parted, jaw going slack.

The world itself seemed to quieten outside the patient room, almost supernaturally so. Robby did not dare move—not even an inch. His dark, warm irises stayed fixated on the elderly woman's cold, pale hand as it rested on the milky-white sheet at the edge of the bed. Really, it was a little odd; Michael Robinavitch had dealt with dying patients many times throughout his career already, but never one that felt so *personal.* Or even remotely personal. He'd always been able to keep a sympathetic - but relatively detached - approach to the matter.

This was different. It *felt* different.

"I can make her very comfortable," he raised the morphine ampoule. "This—"

"—Can't we take her to Williamson? Can't we—"

"It won't do her any good at this point."

"Dammit, Michael."

"It would only," he choked down a rather unexpected lump in his throat. "Would only serve to bring her more discomfort."

"What changed? Thirty minutes ago you were givin' her oxygen, talkin' about diuretics, and... and—"

"Nothing changed," he nodded. "She was in this state the moment you walked in. I'm sorry."

"...Was there anything I could've done differently?" She asked, but the question felt directed more toward a higher power than to Robby himself.

He still obliged: "There's no way to know for sure."

"There has to be something you can do, Michael. Surely—surely there's *something?"*

The doctor held his breath for a few beats.

"Right now, Ella's suffering from pulmonary edema, Sam. She's got a lot of fluid in her lungs, and the retention elsewhere in her body on top of her unresponsiveness, discoloration,

labored breathing, and cool limbs just shows—"

He could not finish the sentence. How *odd,* in Robby's mind, that he could not finish that sentence.

Fully understanding what the man was implying - and forcing herself to process, knowing none of this was Robby's fault - Sam grit her teeth. It took all the strength in her body to muster a singular affirmative nod. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand, choking out a sob. "This is it?"

The doctor wetted his lips. He did not look up—did not meet the woman's eyes. But he *did* nod. Slowly. Hesitantly.

"As I said," his voice was low and meek, "I can make her comfortable."

Samantha Jones did not respond. She tore her eyes from the doctor and laid them, wet and desperate as they were, upon her mother's face. Her ears drank in every labored breath that escaped the elderly woman's chapped, ghostly lips. It was a sign to her that the woman was not dead *yet*—sign enough that she had at least a moment more to think of *some* solution. It was her heart's futile attempt to deny the part of her brain that knew very well her mother did not have any time left.

She shook her head. "I can't do this."

"I understand," Robby comforted.

"I can't let her go. It can't be here. It can't be *now.* Surely not."

A pause.

"I'll give you some privacy. A moment to process. But Sam," Robby offered as he stood to his feet, setting the ampoule in the tray beside the bed, just next to the sterile syringe.

Samantha did not look away from her mother.

"She should be comfortable. This won't get any easier."

He waited for her response, but it did not come. Thus, he offered a polite nod, holding himself calm just long enough to exit the room and shut the door behind him. But the very moment that door clicked closed, a searing bubble of overwhelm churned and rose in his stomach, up to his chest. It burned a path up his insides, leaving his fingertips tingling and his lungs at loss for air. It was a swelling sense of doom, a loss of control.

Robby stepped forward and down the hall, digging the heel of his palm into his sternum as he wobbled his way toward the bathroom. He needed a moment of *real* silence. Needed a moment away from the world to shut everything out and forget this part of himself. Forget his past. Forget why this day had become so overwhelmingly unmanageable. He knew it would be an awful idea to, for the first time in his life in Tennessee, work the eleventh of August. It was a horrible decision, and yet he could not bring himself to keep the clinic closed, even for a single—

"Oh, no, no," Dana scolded, grabbing his arm and tugging him past the bathroom door, walking the man like a dog to the back of the clinic before letting her tight grip loosen. "You wanna tell me what the *fuck* is goin' on with you today?"

The man's eyes were wide, bewildered.

"What's going on with me?" He mumbled in repeat, then huffed. "Sam's mother is dying in my clinic, Dana. That's what's going on with me."

He tried pushing past, but the woman's firm hand was already firmly planted into his shoulder, keeping him right where he stood.

"You've had a pretty thorny fuckin' stick in your ass all day—since *way* before Sam and Ella came in. I'm not an idiot, Robby."

"I think I may have shared it with you the way you're tugging me around," he remarked.

"Don't give me that attitude right now, kid," she bit back, as though Robby wasn't 41—a whole year older than her. "What the hell has gotten into you with your mentees this year? Ditchin' Heather Collins after promisin' her the world wasn't enough for you?"

"That's different and you *know* it—"

"No, actually, I *don't* know! Because you won't tell me shit about it."

Robby hissed in a quieted voice: "Because I *can't.* Do you really not trust that safety is the only reason I'd make such a drastic decision? On *her* behalf?"

The woman did trust Robby that much, at least. She knew him very well; at his core, he wouldn't have made such a choice without good reason. Still, she had other issues to poke at the man about, especially after seeing his behavior toward Dennis:

"Then brushin' Whitaker off like he's a nuisance in your clinic? *Really?* That's a whole other kind of cruel. That kid has been lookin' up to you since the day *you* dragged him here to work for you. I can't recall a time he hasn't looked up to you like you're God himself, reincarnated and walkin' on two ungrateful feet. And even as much of an asshole you've been to him since January, he's kept on workin', workin', and *workin',* just to please you. I see it in his eyes—he ain't doin' this for the love of the game like he used to, he's doin' it for *you.* Ungrateful son of a..."

"He caught me at a busy moment—"

"Every *day* in this place is a busy moment, Robby! And it's only gettin' busier every year!" She clapped her palms together, making the man visibly flinch. "That's my whole damn point! How am I supposed to move to Knoxville on Monday knowing I'm leaving that poor kid behind to get eaten alive by the very man who begged him to come work in this hellhole?"

"He's not—"

"No, *really,* Robby. Really." Her eyes were fiery with a maternal ferocity. "You can't be actin' like this when I'm gone. You can't fall apart in your own stompin' ground like this. That boy *needs* you."

"This isn't an everyday thing, Dana. Today's just... today's different. It's..." he trailed off, unable to bring himself to explain it. Unable to open himself up just enough to show the pain squeezing at his heart.

"How is it *'different'?"*

Something flashed in Robby's eyes. Something that Dana could not decipher, but very much noticed.

He shook his head. "It just is."

"You aren't gonna tell me? After everything we've been through?"

"There's nothing to say," he successfully shut himself down. "It's just a rough day."

Robby built his walls high, keeping something *very* close to his chest. The woman could see it; she could see that he wanted to say more, perhaps needed to. There very clearly *was* something to say. Something more complex than the pain of losing Ella Jones, something more deep-rooted than his gripe with Dennis Whitaker or his distancing from Heather Collins. Robby had a dark cloud over his head—but he wouldn't budge.

"Dammit, Robinavitch—what the hell is so special about *today?"* Dana blurted shamelessly, voice raised.

Such prodding rendered Robby silent. His voice would not work, so in lieu of a verbal response, he shook his head. The look on his face *begged* Dana not to prod any further. She drank that look in, letting it simmer in her mind for a moment before deciding it was no longer worth hounding him for.

"...It's not my business," she sighed, finally retreating.

The man's jaw loosened just a little, eyebrows untensing.

"But that kid out there workin' his ass off for you? Day and night for almost two years now? That is very *much* my business—until I'm out of Franklin. You treat him with respect, or so help me God, I'll make my last few days here Hell on Earth for you."

Robby finally pushed past Dana, making his way toward the hall as he said without turning back to face the woman, "I've got to check on Sam."

"I'm deadly serious, Michael Robinavitch," the woman warned once more—for good measure.

The man dug into the flesh inside his cheek once again, drawing more blood as he gripped the doorknob of exam room C, knuckles white. He couldn't bring himself to twist it and push the door open—not yet. Instead, he took a few hasty, frantic inhales and exhales, letting the

pounding of his heart thrum in his ears like the beat of an apocalyptic drum. Only when it became unbearably loud did he finally twist the knob and slip inside the eerily silent room.

Samantha did not look up; she was still slouched in her chair, lurching over her mother's hand with forehead pressed to wrist as soft sobs of premature mourning grazed past her lips.

Robby stepped over gently, jaw clenched tight as he took his seat to the other side of the woman, making room to examine Ella Jones' pale, cold body. He sat with Samantha for several minutes, keeping a professional distance, but eyeing her. Matted, long brown hair hid the anguish on her face. Every so often, the doctor would glance at Ella, nearly unable to hold his eyes upon her given how well he'd known the woman. She wasn't just his patient—she'd, in a way, taken care of him when he first relocated to Franklin. Took him in when he'd had relations with her daughter. Pieces of Ella Jones' puzzle reminded Robby of his own mother, who he'd taken care of in her *own* final years. Her passing left a mark on him that very clearly hadn't faded yet—

"Her heart's stopped," Robby spoke aloud, forcibly ripping himself from his thoughts.

As he pulled the stethoscope back into place around his neck, a dragged, high mewl poured from Samantha's throat. It fell upon the man's ears, utterly haunting as it sent jolts up his spine.

"She's gone," he hardly managed to get the words out—the quiver in his voice betrayed him.

Immediately, and for the first time in Michael Robinavitch's life, he laid guilty eyes upon his patient, mind flooding like a raging river with *what could've been.* What might have become of Ella Jones if he'd sent her to Williamson on his last home visit? What could've been, had he told Samantha that she'd need to take Ella to a major hospital if such a situation arose? What could've been, if Michael Robinavitch had been any more equipped, any more talented, any more of a miracle-bearer?

But he was only a man.

Each soft sobs coming from Samantha dragged him further and further underwater, and once he felt fully submerged, unable to take a breath in, Robby began to panic.

"I'm very—I'm so sorry," he stood from his chair, wobbling toward the door. "I'm sorry. I need a moment," his palm slammed against the wall, free hand yanking the door open.

He cursed under his breath the very brief moment he met eyes with Dennis from across the clinic.

From the front desk, Dana whipped her head around, blond bangs slinging across her forehead, eyes widening as she watched the doctor stumble out of the room like an idiot. Without a second thought, she was in motion, dropping her pen and hasting over to Ella's room, taking his place. She did not know why Robby was stomping down the hallway, face red in his hands, but she'd cover for him anyway.

"Fuck," Robby hissed into his palm, slamming the back door open with his shoulder and stumbling out into the grass.

His breaths were shaky, quick, and shallow. The lightheadedness swamped his senses like a blur of intoxication, and the world seemed to spin at his feet. An inexplicable weight crushed down upon his chest, making it all the more difficult to fill his lungs and ground himself. Perhaps the ground itself had slipped from beneath his feet—he certainly *felt* as though he was falling. Beads of sweat raced down his temples as his back slammed against the outdoor wall. In the man's fit of fear and falling and instability, there was a distinct lack of control he felt. Would it have been more frightening that he could have done something to save Ella Jones? Or was it more frightening that he could *not?*

A choked sob bubbled forth from Robby's throat as he groaned a prolonged, *"No."*

He was a very smart man, but as he'd come to know in his life, doctors were, ironically, notoriously bad at helping themselves. There lay a truth in the life of a medical professional: many of them cared for others in the *absence* of caring for themselves. Many of them took control of the world around them so as to assume a mimicked control of the world *within* them. But as real of an illusion it had been for decades, Robby felt the seams coming undone in real time; he was not an idiot—he could feel the false sense of control he'd established beginning to crumble.

For his mother. For Ella Jones. And for the man that had made him who he was—the man that had died on this very day, the eleventh of August, just seven years prior. That man's face, warped and colorless, swelled in and out of Robby's mind as he sat with his back against the wall, knees crumpled into his chest, head lurched down and covered in his sweaty palms.

He was so taken by the overwhelm, he hardly noticed when the back door opened once again, shutting quietly as a pair of feet planted themselves in front of him.

"Dr. Robby?" Dennis tried softly.

He did not answer—did not raise his head out of his palms or give any indication that he heard the boy. But he *did* hear him. His sobs had all but quieted, if only to save himself the embarrassment of explaining what he was experiencing to Dennis Whitaker. But

"Dr. Robby," the boy spoke with a little more concern, squatting in front of the older man.

"I'm here," the older man finally croaked.

"Are you?"

A pause.

"...I can't do this."

"Do what?"

"This." Robby finally raised his head, cheeks flushed, jaw clenched. He met Dennis' earthy, soft eyes, blinking through the tears which wetted his own. "I just... can't do it."

Dennis did not immediately respond, carefully crafting his response.

Slowly, he explained: "You have to. We *need* you in there."

"Ella Jones needed me, too," Robby lamented.

It was through that response that Dennis picked up what had happened—Ella Jones, *dead.* His brows furrowed as he tried recalculating his response, entirely unsure how to navigate the minefield that was Michael Robinavitch, slumped against the back wall outside his very own clinic. The boy knew what that old woman meant to Robby, to an extent, at least. He knew the man had history with her—and her daughter. But even then, Robby was not a personable man; Dennis knew *that* much, painfully well. Ella Jones alone could not have been enough to transform him into the utter trainwreck of emotion he had become.

Setting aside every ounce of bitter tension that had festered between them over the last eight months, Dennis prepared himself to save the drowning man before him.

Sitting on his backside, knees huddled into his own chest with his feet on either side of Robby's, the boy cleared his throat. "There're a whole bunch of people in there that you can still save. People who *need* you. I won't pretend I know how bad you're hurting right now. I'm not gonna act like I could handle it any better than you. But me and you both know what happens if you stay out here and dwell on something that you can't change—something that wasn't your fault."

The boy frowned when Robby chuckled, nigh-hysterically. The older man wiped fresh tears with the back of his hand before meeting the younger's eyes again. The ground felt tangible beneath him all of a sudden; he felt a full breath of air fill his lungs as he steeled himself just long enough to speak—deliberately.

"...Sounds like," he croaked, "something *he* would say."

"Who?"

Robby did not response.

"Dr. Robby, who? Like who?"

The older man reached out his arm, placing his hand on Dennis' shoulder, touching skin just above the neck of his scrub shirt. The boy could feel it; it was a hollow attempt to kindly push him away. Something Robby had gotten very comfortable doing since New Year.

"Forget about it, Whitaker," he brushed off, adopting a weak, fake smile.

"No."

The first push-back. Robby blinked, brow twitching as his body processed that single word. A word that had never once come out of Dennis Whitaker's mouth in such a way: so soft, so quiet, yet so firm. In the eight months Robby had spent distancing himself from the boy, it'd just happened—Dennis had simply allowed it to happen. But for the first time, right then, the attempt to close off was met with... *resistance.*

He shook his head, eyes firmly locked on Robby's face, watching as the older man struggled to anticipate what would come next.

"Who are you talking about?"

The doctor's jaw clenched. The ground began to feel unsteady once more. That uncanny sense of dread began welling up in his chest and the words from Dennis' lips bounced like sharp needles in the shells of his ears.

"It's nothing," he tried again—futile.

"Why won't you tell me?"

"Why does it matter?"

"Because it matters to *you."*

Robby paused.

"...I'm not fucking doing this," he grumbled, palms digging into the grass at his sides. "Today of all days—I'm not doing this."

"Dammit Dr. Robby, you owe me!" Dennis yowled, rendering the world around them utterly silent.

Robby froze, brows knitting together contemplatively as he studied the pained expression on the boy's face. He looked angry—beaten. It looked like he'd finally endured enough. Robby knew this would come eventually; he just liked to deny that he'd truly have to deal with the fallout of having involved himself intimately with Dennis Whitaker, only to sever the bond mere days after it began. That day had finally come. The boy sat in front of him, tears welling in his earthy, tired eyes, cheeks flushed with frustration, nose scrunched.

"You *owe* me," he begged again, voice softer than silk—bluer than rain.

Robby bit down hard on his cheek to restrain the guilt banging on the walls of his heart. "Don't look at me with those eyes, Whitaker," he cupped the boy's cheek in his rough, clammy hand, grazing the pad of his thumb under the boy's eye to catch the single tear that betrayed him.

"I've been real good," he choked out, nuzzling ever so subtly into the touch of Robby's palm. "Gave you space for *months."*

The older man parted his lips, but words refused to come out.

"I just want to know what's on with you," Dennis finished.

Using Robby's own words against him—how messy of the kid. Robby recalled that evening on the twenty-fourth of December nearly a year prior. He'd said the same thing to Dennis. He'd practically barked at the kid to be transparent about what was truly going on in his life,

yet he himself never afforded that same honesty. Even *before* he began pulling away from Dennis.

Grasping for a truly filling breath of air through his nose, Robby closed his eyes, hand still firmly cupping the boy's cheek—but it was shakier now. He cleared his throat, opening himself up to the idea of allowing just a glimpse of who he was. A glimpse of himself to the sweet, delicate lover who he'd been shutting out for far too long.

"Today's the eleventh of August," Robby admitted, as though that wasn't common knowledge.

Dennis blinked. "Yes."

"Seven years ago this day," he began tentatively, "a man very important to me died. A man who... frankly, was much of the father I never had."

As he spoke, Robby seemed to find a rhythm—seemed to find footing. It helped, too, that Dennis sat close enough to touch.

"I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Hill District. Every kind of person you could imagine lived there. Every color, every background, every culture. My father passed quite early in my life. My mother managed. Around the time I turned seventeen - it was 1938 - I scored work at the clinic on my street to help pay for pre-med. It was the place mother always took me when need be."

"That's where you met..." Dennis surmised.

"Dr. Montgomery Adamson," Robby mumbled, "was his name."

Saying that name sent a cold shudder up his spine. Dennis noticed the tensing muscles in his face, realizing immediately what must've been going on: Robby was being haunted by ghosts of his past. It made sense, too, that the man who so avidly hated vulnerability would be hiding something so painful.

"He taught me most everything I know. Made me who I am, really. He was, uh," the older man's voice faltered just a little. "I'm sure he was the reason I even made it as far as I did in school. He had *connections*. Had taken me under his wing. I think he saw me as much like a responsibility as I saw him like a father." Robby shifted his weight, pulling his hand away from Dennis. "He showed me a perspective about people... that I never would've been able to see without him. Showed me the importance of caring for anyone—*anyone,* who needed help."

Dennis clung to every word like his life depended on it, eyes boring holes into Robby, ears perked like a dog's.

"After my residency, I moved back to Hill District to care for mother—she wasn't well," Robby shook his head, eyes fixated on a blade of grass bent under Dennis' shoe. "This was... around 1952. Dr. Adamson took me on as the *'boy of the graveyard-shift.'* Turned his humble

place on our street into a twenty-four hour makeshift hospital. We did a lot for people. Lost some lives—saved a *lot* more. I thought I'd finally understood what it meant to be a doctor."

The boy's brow furrowed. "But...?"

"But mother passed away a few years later. Summer of 1955." He looked up, locking his own shameful eyes with Dennis' as he admitted: "I didn't take it very well."

A pained expression contorted the older man's face. Dennis wanted, desperately, to reach out and touch him.

"I took time off—to grieve," he stuttered. "I didn't think he'd..."

Dennis was struggling to resist the urge to comfort him.

"I should've *known*." Robby's chin trembled. "He told me he'd handle my absence and I thought it'd be fine." A pause. "Ended up overworking himself. He was that kind of man, though. I should've... known he wouldn't slow down—not after everything we accomplished for Hill District."

The boy's shoulders slumped, lips curled downward.

Robby clenched his jaw tight, as if to punish himself, simply for reliving his mistake. "But I let it happen. Two weeks later, there it was. On the evening edition newspaper: *Dr. Montgomery Adamson, died suddenly on the eleventh of August, 1955, in his home. Myocardial infarction."*

"You can't be sure that was because of—"

"—Word got around fast. He'd been covering my shifts instead of closing the clinic in the evenings. Couldn't resist the regulars who needed me. Who needed *us."*

"So... what? You blame yourself?" Dennis asked in disbelief.

"Who else is there to blame? It was my shift he was covering—"

"He made a *choice."*

"And that choice killed him," Robby seethed. *"I...* might as well have *killed* him."

"No," Dennis leaned forward, grabbing Robby's face with both hands and forcing their eyes to lock. "Look at me, Robby."

"I shouldn't have opened today," he shook his head as much as he could in Dennis' hands. "I knew it was a bad idea. I can't *fucking* focus."

"Hey," Dennis cooed. "Listen to me, Dr. Robby."

The older man bit down hard enough on his cheek to stop his groveling—just enough to hear the boy out through the pained look on his face. Dennis looked around at the ground for a

moment, searching for the right words and putting them together.

"...Do you remember what Miss Collins told us on New Year? About that fella'... Dr. JP?"

The older man hesitated for a moment, then nodded slowly, sharp puffs of breath whistling in and out of his nostrils.

"She said that *everyone* deals with these things differently. We never know how good we got it until it's over. But... she didn't let that stop her," Dennis shook his head, brows tense like bowstrings. "She fought harder because of it. Took control in every way she could with the whole wide world workin' against her."

The kid was keeping Robby from drowning—he could *feel* Dennis pulling him back toward the surface with each second he held him. Each second he spoke to him.

"You've done that same thing... whether you see it or not. You brought a practice to Franklin that people *need.* You carried on these past seven years despite it all and gave these people something that they never would've had otherwise. How long would Ella Jones have lasted if not for you, Dr. Robby? Huh?"

The older man did not respond, but he knew what Dennis was getting at; Ella Jones wouldn't have been able to afford proper care without him—likely wouldn't have lived *nearly* as long.

"You gave Heather a chance. You gave *me* a chance. You've done so much good, it ain't fair to beat yourself half to death over something you couldn't control." Dennis paused, contemplating before repeating his earlier statement, "We need you in there."

The boy took a sharp breath in, then added: *"I* need you."

The words hung in the air like tantalizing rope, meant to allow Robby a way out of the hole he'd fallen into. The two men stared at one another, warm, summer evening wind whistling between them as Dennis pulled his hands away and stood to his feet. He looked down, allowing the doctor only a brief moment more to bask in his pain on the ground before extending his hand out.

"Give me your hand."

Robby looked up, jaw still clenched, eyes still threatening to spill tears. He winced, rubbing the back of his head with his palm, as he so often did. Wiping those pained eyes one last time on the inside of his elbow, he took the boy's hand with a clap, pulling himself to his feet. One foot in front of the other, he closed the gap between them and pressed a chaste kiss on the boy's temple.

It was almost funny how quickly Dennis shrank back down the moment Robby was at full height in front of him. His confidence - no longer necessary, it seemed - deflated, and his shoulders slouched. His eyes no longer stuck magnetically to Robby's, instead darting around awkwardly—meekly.

"Dennis," Robby whispered the name softly. It drew the boy's attention like moth to flame. It lit his eyes up in a way that Robby hadn't seen in a long time—in a way that buzzed warm in his chest.

The older man rested his hand on the back of Dennis' neck, pulling him in close enough to feel the heat from his body as he said, "Thank you—"

"—Robby?" Dana called out.

Before the back door of the clinic had even fully opened - before the thought could even process in his mind - Robby pushed hard, sending Dennis tumbling backward until he fell flat onto his backside in the grass. A pitiful gasp flew from the boy's mouth, and quicker than the older man could spare a second glance, Dana closed the space between them. She slammed her palm hard into his cheek with a loud *smack* that seemed to echo into the trees beyond the clinic.

Dana barked, "Robby, you son of a *bitch!"*

The sting of that slap burned like a searing hot cast iron skillet crushed into flesh, but yet it utterly paled in comparison to the pain of turning his head and laying eyes upon the kid, who appeared... *totally* shut down.

"Whitaker, are you okay, kid?" Dana spoke as she knelt over to check on the boy, but her voice sounded like it came from underwater among the ringing in Robby's ears.

His gaze stayed fixated upon that face—it was the first time he'd ever bore witness to a Dennis Whitaker void of *any* emotion, eyes having lost the light as quickly as it came. No fear, sorrow, no anguish, no pain, nothing. Just a husk of a man, shut down by Michael Robinavitch's own guilty hands.

Dana invited Dennis over for dinner the following Sunday. He accepted.

Her house was, as Dennis presumed, far more empty than it may have been days or weeks prior. She was only to work one more Monday at the Robinavitch Health Center, and then she'd move to Knoxville that same day after her shift, starting her journey as a nursing student.

The walls around the dining room were dimly lit. Floral wallpaper spanned the interior, supporting a white popcorn ceiling. The cream-colored carpet at his feet was cozy, and more fanciful than he'd ever seen. At home in Nebraska, the floors were only sparsely decorated with rugs, none of which fuzzy or clean like Dana's floor.

The rosewood dining table was decorated with bowls and large plates full of food. Steamed rolls, savory green beans, buttery mashed potatoes, corn bread, all surrounding a main course

of creamy chicken and dumplings. Elena and Maggie had long since served themselves and picked at their little plates like chickens with feed. Adam stayed invested only in the rolls, mashed potatoes and dumplings. Dana served herself, and Dennis, a little bit of everything.

But Dennis didn't have much of an appetite—not while Robby haunted his thoughts. Not while the thought of Dana leaving in two days prodded away at him.

"I'll take your roll if you don't want it, Dennis," Adam asked politely.

Dana scoffed, swatting dismissively. "Eat your own food, hooligan."

The toddlers giggled.

"I'll eat it," the boy tried meekly. "Sorry, a lot's on my mind. I'm, well... y'know. It's tough knowing you're leaving."

"Aww," Dana's lips curled downward, hand over her heart. "We're gonna miss you, Whitaker. But really, we're only ever a daytrip away, hm? You and that hunk of junk can make it to Knoxville and see us sometime, right?"

"I'm sure I can!" He half tried cheering himself up. "I just don't know how often. With Dr. Robby and I at the clinic alone, it'll probably be a tight schedule."

"Robby'll just have to make do," the woman's tone hardened a bit as she stabbed a dumpling with her fork. "He can't chain you down more than you let him."

"I *do* need a livin'," he chuckled.

"I hear you," Adam chimed in, grabbing a fourth roll from the woven basket. "I'll tell you what—living certainly *is* cheaper in the south, but not by much. And it's only getting worse every year, it seems like."

"I'm lucky Dr. Robby pays well."

"He should pay you more, the way he treats you," Dana remarked, stuffing a dumpling in her mouth.

Dennis paused, fork tapping on his plate for a moment. "He's... he's a good man." The words came out as though he were trying to convince *himself* of it. "Just has a lot of baggage."

"Trust me, Whitaker, I get it. Been workin' with the man for years now. He's a prickly pear. My issue is: I didn't think he had it in him to push someone around the way he's been doin' to you. I mean, *really,* what is it?"

Dennis did not know if she was legitimately asking a question, so he did not respond—only looked up at the woman.

"I'm deadly serious! What's got him so bothered about you, kid?"

Before the boy could respond, Adam added, "Heard he was a real ass on Friday."

"Oh *god,"* Dana groaned. "Friday. That shift was hell. And Robby kept goin' on about it bein' an *'especially bad day,'* or some such thing—you don't shove an innocent, hardworking boy - who's only trying to help out around the damn clinic, mind you - to the ground. There's just no good reason to."

The scrutiny of being talked about as though he was not there—it felt odd.

"He tried sayin' it was solely 'cause of Ella, but he was being a pain in the ass since that morning—way before sweet Ella came in." Dana paused for a moment, letting go of a grieving sigh. "She really *was* a sweet old thing. Knew Robby since he came down from Nashville in '56."

"Ah, she's the one with the..." Adam trailed off.

"Daughter, yep. He and Ella's girl had a thing for a year or so. I'm not entirely convinced he wasn't just doin' it to keep Ella happy, though. That woman wanted her daughter a husband *real* bad."

Dennis interjected: "He was very torn up about her passing. I know that much."

The blond woman across the table chewed and swallowed her bite of chicken and dumpling, then shook her head. "I get that. I really do. But there's no good reason to take that pain out on anyone else—even Robby knows that. I'm just thinkin' there was a lot more going on in his mind than he wanted to tell me. Did he say anything to you, kid? He tell you what kind of stick is up his ass n' why he keeps making it *your* problem?"

Before Dennis could even respond, Dana picked up the glint in Dennis' eye. She could see he knew something about Robby's behavior, and her brows furrowed as she tried to read inside his pupils as though they held an answer.

"It's a personal thing, I think," he feigned. Swallowing the lump in his throat, the boy added timidly: "We're working it out, though. Working through it."

"...That's good," the woman nodded, trying hard to fight off the urge to pry further. "Good to hear."

"You should keep your boundaries clear with him," Adam offered. "So this kind of thing doesn't become regular."

"I already talked to him Friday afternoon about his behavior toward the kid," Dana interjected. "Told him he can't act this way when I'm gone - not to talk about you like you're a child, of course, Whitaker. I'm just sayin'... I made it clear to him that he can't do you like he did Collins."

Dennis blinked.

"What?"

"Hm?" Dana turned to him, a harmless look on her face.

"What'd you say? About Heather."

"I said *'I made it clear to him that he can't do you like he did Collins.'* The whole... kickin' her out thing."

Bewilderment melted upon Dennis' face. Robby had only ever told him - since Heather Collins had stopped showing up at the clinic eight months ago - that she'd decided she no longer felt safe at the clinic.

"He—he kicked..." the boy stammered, "Collins out?"

"That's what he told me. Said he had no choice. And I'm not criticizing him for doing it—I don't think he'd lie about a safety concern if it pertained to her. I scolded him about it two years ago. Told him he needed to go all the way if he was gonna take her under his wing—couldn't half-ass it or jeopardize her well-being. Maybe he felt like it was in her best interest, I dunno. But I *do* think that was the first time I realized he was off the deep end, at least a little. This year's been rough on him, anyone can see. "

"He didn't... say anything else about it?"

The words spilled from Dennis' mouth before thought could process. It almost sounded as though he didn't believe Dana—that wasn't his intent.

She shrugged, scraping the last of the mashed potatoes from her plate. "That's all I know about it, kid. Evidently, I know him a lot less than I thought I did. I still love him like a brother, but... he's made some *choices."*

Dennis clenched down on his jaw—hard. Robby had *actually* lied to him.

"Yes he has," the boy practically seethed.

The anger grew like wildfire, uncontrollable in Dennis' chest. He clenched his fist around the fork he held, nearly shaking as he tried - and failed - inhaling quietly through his nose, exhaling through his mouth. When that frustration refused to subside, he stood from his seat, standing awkwardly for a moment.

"I should go," he tried to speak through the red-hot anger behind his eyes. "Thank you for everything. Dinner, your company, your family, thank you."

"Whitaker? Don't you wanna take any leftovers home with you?"

Dana and Adam had stood from their chairs, ready to at least walk the boy out to his car, but he was already gone, swinging the front door open on his own, letting it slam shut behind him.

The rattling *bang, bang, bang* of the clinic's front door shook Robby's untouched glass of whiskey, even from all the way upstairs in his home. Having interrupted the confession he was struggling to write, he slammed his journal and pen down on the coffee table, scurrying to his feet from the couch. No one was supposed to be over that night. The clinic had long since closed, too. With each creaking thump down the stairs and into the clinic, the doctor's heart began thumping in its own frantic rhythm. It only settled itself when he laid eyes upon Dennis Whitaker, who stood outside waiting to be let in, illuminated from behind with a warm orange glow from the distant streetlights.

Robby froze in place for a moment, brows knitting together as he contemplated the worth of letting the boy in. They hadn't formally spoken since he shoved him to the ground that past Friday—just as Dana had walked out and nearly caught them being... overly *fond* of one another.

The boy looked angry.

It was, of course, inevitable that he'd want to speak about what happened eventually. Robby just hadn't anticipated it being so soon, and on such a quiet night—a Sunday, the night before Dana's final shift at the Robinavitch Health Center.

As he rattled the key and unlocked the door, swinging it open, Robby said, "What are you doing here so late—"

"You lied to me."

"What?"

Not at all the words he'd expected from the kid's mouth.

"You lied," he seethed, shoving Robby pitifully weakly as he stomped inside the front of the clinic, door slamming shut behind him. He did not turn to face Robby, who now stood behind him, frozen and bewildered. "This whole year. Almost a whole *year."*

"Whitaker, get specific."

"Heather Collins," he finally turned, tears welled in his pupils like wet pearls.

"Jesus Christ," Robby sighed, burying his face in his hands and rubbing. "Can we do this *after* Dana's moved? Tomorrow'll be awkward enough as it is."

"Thanks to *you,"* the boy nodded.

"To *me?"*

"I didn't ask you to shove me like that."

"Ah, of course! So you'd rather she have seen us kissing? Is that it?"

"I'd rather you have treated me like a human from the get-go eight *months* ago after I gave you my innocence—but here we are." His lip quivered, and he paused a moment before

blurting: "I'd have liked if you'd treated Heather like a human, too."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean, Whitaker? Speak your damn mind."

"You told me she left this clinic of her own volition, Robby. You *swore* it."

"Did she not?" Robby's sarcastic tone drew forth more red-hot anger from the boy.

Dennis shook his head incredulously, lips curled downward.

"...I had dinner with the Evans' tonight. They said you kicked her out."

The doctor's jaw clenched and a huff of air whistled out his nostrils.

"...It was a mutual understanding—"

"—Bullshit!"

"It was!" Robby flailed his hands forward.

"Then what in God's name possessed you to tell Dana you *'kicked her out'* of your clinic? Huh?"

"You're joking. What 'possessed' me?" The man scoffed. *"You* fucking possessed me!"

"I don't have a clue what you mean," the boy spat.

"I can't tell Dana why Collins had to leave—I could hardly tell Collins, herself. I'd have had to explain your mother to the both of them, and how the hell would I have done that without putting this—*us* in danger?"

Dennis squinted, baffled by the man in front of him. "My *mother?* Is that what all of this has been about? All this time?"

Robby's nose twitched, crossing his arms as he watched the boy put the pieces together.

The doctor barked like it was stupidly obvious: "She threatened to call the police—"

"—She said she *ought* to."

That correction forced a dumbfounded scoff from Robby.

"What do you think would happen if a couple of cops came strolling in one night on a tip and Heather Collins was prancing around in the clinic?"

Dennis only shook his head.

"What do you think would happen if you and I were reported as *homosexuals?* We could be charged with sodomy! My medical license, our jobs, our freedoms—our *lives...* would be over."

"My mama *told* you that night—she wouldn't do somethin' like that knowing it'd hurt me, too. She isn't like that."

"You ran all the way here to Franklin just to get away from that family, kid. I wouldn't put it past any one of them. And I sure as hell wouldn't put myself, you, or Collins at risk betting on a stranger's sympathy."

"...So you pushed us away without any warning?" Dennis croaked through the lump in his throat. "Didn't even flinch?"

"Heather knows exactly why I did what I did. We talked about it in January just after your mother—"

"And you didn't talk to *me* about anything?" The boy whined. "You left me in the cold for eight months, Robby!"

Unable to resist and unable to ignore the aching of his heart, Robby closed the space between them, cupping Dennis' face with his hands. He frowned, looking down upon his weeping lover with guilt and with shame as he stammered: "I didn't want you to feel *guilty.* You never would've forgiven yourself thinking you ran Collins off—thinking you ran *me* off! I—I wanted to protect you."

"I didn't need protecting!" Dennis bit back, but the anger melted into pain just as fast—he trembled as he whispered, "I just needed *you."*

Against all rational judgment, Dennis closed the remaining gap between them, whines quelled by the soft press of the older man's lips on his own. He stood on tip-toes as his arms wrapped around the firm figure in front of him, clinging like he was close to the edge of a cliff—like he was not *allowed* to let go. It was a desperate kiss, and Robby fueled it just as equally, hands raking through the boy's hair and finding purchase at the nape of his neck, warm and soft. A tongue swept across a bottom lip, teeth grazed sensitive flesh, noses nuzzled against one another; the taste of Dennis sent jolts of hot arousal downward in Robby's loins. It was a sensation he hadn't felt since eight months ago when he first took the younger man.

It was a sensation that he'd learned to be terrified of.

Robby pulled back, holding Dennis at a safe distance with his fist balled in the boy's plaid shirt. Dennis tried to close the gap again, letting out a soft, pitiful grunt when the man did not budge.

Robby groaned, anguish laced in his gravelly voice. "We can't right now."

A kind of finality settled into the air around Dennis Whitaker. He trembled as the doctor stepped back, far enough out of his space that he could no longer feel the heat of his body.

"Then when?"

Robby did not answer. He tore his hungry eyes away from the boy, boring holes into the floor avoidantly.

"Dr. Robby," Dennis tried. *"When?"*

"I don't know, Whitaker." He admitted frustratedly, rubbing the back of his head with his palm. "We shouldn't *at all.* It's not smart. It's not safe."

The boy closed his eyes, nodding. The front room of the clinic was silent like a cold winter night. The lights above were dimmed, leaving only the isolating company of darkness to envelope the two men as they stood, several feet apart now.

Dennis Whitaker decided in that darkness that he'd had enough. Two years ago he made the mistake of digging into a pie that he knew he'd struggle to resist in the future. That had festered and mutated into an uncontrollable need for Michael Robinavitch, one that had - by some stroke of unfathomable luck - become like white noise in 1961 when the man first took him under his wing. He thought he might be able to go the rest of his life not knowing what it was like to sate that hunger—*truly* sate it. But his luck ran out when Robby knocked on his door that fateful Christmas Eve. Too close to resist, he allowed himself to be taken by the man. Had allowed himself to give in to an urge that he knew very well he'd never again be able to resist.

"I can't go on like this."

Those words cut through the silence like a knife.

Robby looked up from the floor.

Dennis continued: "I won't survive this."

"Don't talk like that."

"How can I not? I'm not allowed to dream of a life with you."

The words squeezed tight over Robby's heart. He had to bite down on the sore flesh inside his cheek just to hold himself from visibly reacting.

"...You're *allowed* to do what you please."

"And it'd kill me to do so." The boy paused, eyes focusing on Robby's pupils as if searching for something. "But you wouldn't get it, would you?"

Robby stood in silence.

"You couldn't understand—because you don't feel that same need, do you, Dr. Robby?"

"Whitaker, you couldn't possibly fathom how much I 'get it'."

"How can I trust that? When you left me to hang? All this time, you left me in the dark and it never once hurt you the way it hurt me."

"I *was* hurting." Robby defended. "I *am* hurting."

"But I'd never know it, because you don't talk to me!"

"I told you about Hill District!" The older man dissented, voice raised.

"Only *after* I pried it out of you!" Dennis returned. *"After* subjecting me to your cold shoulder and your sharp tongue—something you've been doing for *eight months! Don't you get it?"* He huffed. "It took all that time of suffering in silence for me to put my foot down and demand you show me a little respect—a *smidge* of trust. Imagine how doomed I'd be trying to stick by your side for another eight months? Or *years*, even?" Dennis wiped a fallen tear from his cheekbone. "I'd be dead of a broken heart long before the rest of the world could kill me!"

"So—what? You're just *done?"* Robby scoffed. "Hanging up the keys?"

Ignoring the charged response, Dennis took one single step forward.

"If you let me walk out that door," he began tentatively, feeling the swell of nerves thump in his heart. "I won't come back."

The doctor's eyes widened so subtly it was hardly noticeable.

"Whitaker—"

"If I walk out that door," he repeated more firmly. "I won't come back."

Dennis took one daring step forward.

"Whitaker," Robby demanded the boy's attention.

Another step forward. His eyes were cold and hurt, brows angled in a determined frown.

Robby balled his fist and seethed, *"Whitaker."*

With the third step, Dennis brushed shoulders with Robby, but neither man met eyes. They stood firm in stance. The boy picked up pace, light taps turning into stomps as he stormed for the door, and the doctor did not dare turn around to watch.

"Whitaker," he hissed one more time, but it came out far quieter, almost like a plea.

The door was quick to creak as it swung open, and quicker to slam when it shut. The noise rattled every bone in Robby's body. He knew it was over. He could see it in the boy's eyes; he'd been pushed beyond his limit. He likely very much meant what he said about not coming back, and Robby would now have to navigate what that meant—for his clinic, and for his heart.

Whatever flame he'd lit inside of the boy was over, and Michael Robinavitch was still unaware of the flame that would continue to grow inside himself.

Dennis made the drive to the nearest payphone—dangerously quick, speeding through the lonely streets of Franklin with a kind of anguish in his blood that couldn't be settled. Even after stopping the car, he gripped onto the steering wheel with white knuckles, forehead pressed into it as he sobbed. A lone, dim streetlamp hung over his car, spotlighting it in the mid of night for no one to see.

When he finally pulled himself upright after several minutes—having poured every tear from his eyes, Dennis leaned his head back onto the headrest, eyeing his mother's notebook, which sat tempting in the passenger seat. She'd written the home phone number in it all those months ago on New Year. Frankly, he never imagined he'd use it—but some dreadful voice in the back of his mind told him he should keep it. Just in case.

This was the case, it seemed.

Stepping out of the car with the notebook clutched in his quivering right hand, Dennis shuffled to the payphone, dispensing a day's work worth of coins, dialing as he pressed the handle into his ear, counting every click and churn of the machine.

The call hummed, trying to connect for almost a full minute before another distinct click came from the speaker, and a voice said: "Hello, this is your operator. I'm sorry to say we can't reach the person you're trying to contact. It *is* quite late."

Dennis swallowed. "...I see."

There was an awkward pause.

"Could I leave a message?"

"Of course, I can deliver a message. What would you like me to say?"

The boy paused again, thinking for a moment, grip tightening on the handle of the telephone. His lip quivered, voice trembling as he inhaled a shaky breath, choking out the words:

"Please just let them know it's Dennis. Tell them I made a mistake... tell them I'm coming home."

Chapter End Notes

Hello again lovely people! Thank you so much for the love on this story as always, I hope you don't kill me after this chapterrrr...
Important notes below:

I've done a lot of updating to the tags and synopsis of 'The Overs' on Ao3, so please re-familiarize yourself if you care. For full transparency, I am still tossing back and forth between a few minor details regarding how (specifically) I want to get us to the final scene of this story, but I will continue to update tags as necessary until the whole thing is complete.

ALSO, note:
Fuck AI until the end of time, I'm still gonna hold onto my em dashes harder than dennis holds onto robby's dick idgaf.

Chapter 9: Old Friends and Bookends

Chapter Summary

Everything changes now. Dennis discovers there is no escape from himself. Robby prepares to confess his feelings.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 9's song is "Old Friends" and "Bookends" from Simon and Garfunkel's 1968 album, "Bookends"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The drive home to Nebraska was as trying as Dennis had expected it would be. It was primarily a fever dream of long hours on curving roads where hills and trees spread inward and outward. The sun had risen by the time he'd made it halfway through the drive, but he made several stops along the way: gas, maintenance, and food. He'd linger at each stop, as an odd way of delaying the inevitable reunion he'd soon have with his family. The family he had run away from years ago—the mother who drove the nail between Robby and himself.

He thought about that in particular many times along the way back to Broken Bow; all this time, it had been the words from his mother that set Robby off. In a way, that was almost relieving, but equally, it was a wake-up call. He and Michael Robinavitch could not have survived love—that was his conclusion.

"My sweet bird," Adeline Whitaker squealed as she bear-hugged her son, who stood at the front door in awkward stance, unsure what to do. She rocked him in the embrace, squeezing and running her fingers through his greasy hair. "My boy. My baby."

"Hi," he offered, voice muffled.

Adeline pulled away, but her hands remained clinging to Dennis' arms. Her dark brown eyes searched his, sun-kissed skin of her face scrunching into a sympathetic stare. "Was the drive alright? I like your ride," she pointed to the boy's sorry excuse for a car, parked just behind him. He did not turn. "I got your message as soon as I woke up, and," she inhaled, placing a hand over her heart, "you can't imagine how excited Thane and I were."

"Pa's home?"

"He's at the table," she grinned. "Waitin' with a plate full of eggs and sausage—*oh,* and your favorite hash."

"There's breakfast?" Dennis' stomach betrayed him.

His mother giggled hearing the rumble. She always made breakfast in the mornings. "Didn't light up the stove 'till an hour ago. It's still hot and crispy the way you always liked it."

Leading her son through the front door of the dinky wooden porch, Adeline tugged his wrist, looking back to see him process the familiar home around him. The smell, the look, the warmth. Pain, nostalgia, and an overwhelmingly unreadable light flickered behind his eyes as he took it all in. Each step they made toward the kitchen elicited cries from the wooden planks beneath, and those cries echoed as groans in the walls around them. It was a terribly old house.

Yet it felt indomitable to Dennis Whitaker.

As they passed the living room, the boy's brows knitted together, eyes halting upon the very rug he stood upon the day he'd had his final argument with Thane. The anger on his father's face—the searing hot rage in Dennis' *own* blood. It was a goodbye that felt unarguably final, but yet here he was once again. Only just over two years had passed.

"Thane!" Adeline called out just before she stepped into the kitchen with her son. "Dennis is home!"

There was no verbal response, but he could hear a distinctly wet coughing fit ensue from the kitchen. Adeline looked back at her son and sighed, whispering, "He's caught a nasty cough this past few weeks. Think he's just gettin' old."

When they crossed the corner and into the kitchen, the boy met his father's eyes. The old man was sitting at the end of the dining table, having already picked away at his plate of food. Dennis could feel the muscles in his body tense, almost reflexively, like he was prepared to fight—he knew there would be no fighting. The man looked far older now than he did two years ago. Perhaps managing things around the farm without Dennis' help had truly beaten away at him. Or perhaps whatever cough had riddled his lungs was sapping the remaining life from his eyes. He would've liked to imagine Thane deserved such a fate, but the man was still his father. A kind of soreness swelled in his heart.

Despite sizing one another up for a very awkward handful of seconds, neither man broke the silence. Dennis half-expected his father to—he figured it was the least the man could've done, but he did not.

"Now don't be shy," Adeline chirped, pulling her son toward the table. "Sit down, honey."

He plopped down into the chair that his mother pulled out for him, avoiding meeting his father's eyes anymore as he waited for her to bring his plate to the table. A cream-white plate full of steaming, scrambled eggs, plump sausage, and a crispy, golden hash. It was so very nostalgic—in taste, smell, and sight.

Eagerly, his mother watched as he stuffed himself, as though waiting for him to praise the food. "Is it everything you missed down in Tennessee?"

"It's good," he settled.

It did not taste like Robby's cooking. But that should not have mattered anymore.

"You ate better food down there?"

Dennis looked up. "No," he lied.

Adeline smiled.

"Mark's moved out?" Dennis asked, looking between his mother and father.

She nodded. "Last bird to leave the nest. But you'll never guess where he ended up."

"...Where?"

"Got into University of Nebraska," she spoke proudly.

The boy's eyes widened, but he contained the shock—confusion.

"How'd he afford that?" Dennis asked through a mouthful of hash.

"Swallow your food, boy," Thane grumbled, cutting through the tempo of the conversation for a brief second before being interrupted by another fit of coughs. He raised his hand up to his lips and hacked away.

Adeline eyed her husband with a tinge of concern. As the fit died down, she looked back to her son and said, "Merit- somethin' somethin'."

"Merit..." the boy squinted. "A merit scholarship?"

"Mm," she hummed through her fork. "That."

A curious look settled onto Dennis' face. He was the youngest of his other three brothers, but Mark had always stayed home to help out around the farm—long after he'd turned eighteen. Simon and Howard however, had both led quick lives, moving out with high school sweethearts mere months after they'd become adults, many years ago. None of his brothers were fond of Dennis, nor particularly kind, but Mark was the closest he'd ever had to a friend.

"What for?"

"He was always a sharp kid in school," Adeline defended.

"I meant his major."

"Oh." She blinked. "Psychology."

"Sounds like Mark."

"Anyway—tell me about *you,* baby."

Dennis' lip twitched, and he swallowed a lump in his throat. "What about me?"

Adeline scowled. "Tell me all the nice things about Tennessee!"

Quicker than Dennis could speak, Thane stood from his chair with a loud creak. He cleared his throat and pointedly left his plate. "I don't wanna hear about it."

They watched as the man took a step forward, stopping to let out another gross hack into his balled fist.

"...That's a real nasty cough you've got." Dennis spoke softly. "I learned a lot at the clinic. I could try and—"

"I don't want you pokin' me, boy," the man spat. "Don't need no *doctor."*

Adeline and Dennis watched in silence as the man grumbled to the sink to wash his hands before hobbling out of the kitchen. The house creaked with each step, until there was the slam of the front door.

Dennis realized very quickly that his mother had - very heavily, and very desperately, it seemed - sugarcoated his father's 'change of heart and attitude.' Thane seemed very much the same man he was when Dennis ran off in 1960—save for this new ailment likely festering in his lungs. Tired, closed off, disappointed, *disgusted.*

Disgust. The only look he ever saw in his father's eyes.

The air in the kitchen felt ruined. To ground herself, Adeline stood from her seat, grabbing Thane's plate and bringing it to the sink.

Looking up from his own plate, Dennis parted his lips. "Evidently," he began, then inhaled shakily. "If there was anything nice to say about Tennessee, I wouldn't be here right now to say it."

At the Robinavitch Health Center in Franklin, Dana had expected Dennis to come in by afternoon so they could begin their informal handover, as they had done for over a year. It was her last day, too—she'd been looking forward to seeing him one last time before embarking on her nursing school journey. Issue was, the further past noon it became, the more clear it was that Dennis Whitaker would not show.

"I can count on one hand the number of times that kid's been late for a shift," Dana chuckled. "Wonder if he's having car trouble again." She nudged Robby as he focused on the patient chart laid out before him.

Robby looked up. "Kid probably just overslept."

The night prior, Dennis had made it very clear that he wasn't coming back, and yet Robby still allowed that sense of finality to slip him come sunrise. He'd convinced himself that Dennis did not mean it—convinced himself that things would not change so drastically before he could fix them.

"He stopped by the clinic last night, didn't he?" Dana asked.

Confused how she knew, Robby locked eyes with the woman.

He contemplated lying for a moment.

"...He did," Robby admitted instead. "Wasn't here late, though."

"Well, did he say anything to you?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," he lied. "I've gotta deal with this," Robby waved the patient chart as he stepped past the desk, headed for the exam room.

He spent several minutes in there with his patient before coming back out. He'd hoped Dana would be tied down with triage, but she'd already cleared the ones waiting. She stood there behind the desk, eager to pry him further. It was, in his eyes, her favorite thing to do.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," she repeated, pondering. "So what's ordinary, then? What'd you two talk about?"

"Why's it matter, Dana?"

She shrugged. "I dunno. He left our dinner pretty flustered last night. *Right* after tellin' us that you told him Collins *chose* to leave."

Those words. Those damned words.

Caught in his fib, Robby clenched his jaw, lips flattened together in a pained smile.

"He was a little upset I didn't tell him the whole story about the Collins thing, is all."

"Well why didn't you tell him the truth, Robby?"

"I didn't want him to blame himself—" the words came out faster than he could think, frustration clouding his judgment before he could cut himself off.

As soon as the words fell upon her ears, Dana squinted.

"Why would he blame himself for Collins' leaving?"

Robby did not respond.

"You dug the hole now, Robby," she chuckled, but there was no humor in it. "Might as well tell me what the fuck is going on."

"I would if I didn't have patients to get to."

Again, Robby stepped away from the desk, leaving Dana to watch as he bounced around the clinic and avoided her for the next half hour. He trailed in and out of exam rooms with patients, several minutes at a time. His mask was very impressive—the stress and fatigue he'd shown in his brief conversations with Dana were entirely hidden when he was with a patient.

His mask only slipped again when Dana called for him, *just* as he tried passing the desk again.

"What are you gonna do if he doesn't show up?" She sighed. "What am *I* gonna do?"

"You're going to leave as scheduled and do what you need to do."

"And where does that leave *your* sorry ass?" Dana still worried about the man.

Robby shook his head. "I won't ask you to overstay your shift. You've got a hell of a day ahead of you."

"I can't tell if this is you showin' real concern for me, or just tryin' to shoo me out before I can ask what the hell's goin' on between you and Whitaker."

The man's jaw clenched. Defensively, he nearly bit back, but an inexplicable swell of anguish choked him up before words could fly out. He had to bite it back and swallow it down, standing awkwardly in front of the desk for only a moment longer before stomping off again.

He spent the rest of the shift like that—hoping that Dennis would show up. *Praying* that the kid would show up. And he never did. It was exactly as he had said: Robby let him walk out the door the night prior, and he did not come back. On top of the rapidly growing fire that was Dana Evans, Robby now felt the heavy concern of Dennis' wellbeing knock at the back of his skull. Was the kid okay? Was he still at home? Did he actually *try* to come into work and something had happened?

In the end, Dana did not leave until Robby closed the clinic for the evening. He insisted that he'd survive just fine, but she would not hear any of that. Truthfully, too, she was nervous that Dennis wouldn't show up. It hurt like a dull ache in her heart to know that this was likely Robby's doing, and that it had now stopped her from getting to see the kid one last time.

As Robby stepped back inside after hooking the medical referral information sign to the front door of the clinic, Dana watched him. She just stood behind the desk, leaning into it, watching the man like a hawk.

"You fucked up real bad, didn't you, Robinavitch?"

Robby stood there, staring in a fit of what looked like shame.

Wiping a tear from her cheekbone, Dana got vulnerable. "I wanted to say goodbye to the kid, dammit."

"...I'm sorry," he croaked.

She nodded. "Me too."

"What have you got to be sorry for?"

Dana pursed her lips. "For making you feel like you couldn't be honest with me all these years."

Robby's eyes fell to the floor. His jaw clenched, fist balling at his side. A lump formed in his throat, but he swallowed it quickly as he asked: "What haven't I—"

"Is it love?"

Three words. They were only three words, and yet they nearly stopped Robby's heart. He did not respond to Dana—did not answer her question. His brows knitted together, eyes burning holes through the floor of the clinic.

But Dana did not need him to respond: the silence was more than telling.

"...I may be sick."

Dana chuckled. "Maybe you are."

There was a pause, and she took a moment to find the right words:

"But maybe he's the cure."

Robby looked up through reddened, teary eyes at Dana. She still remained behind the desk, leaned into it. Her tears seemed to have dried up, but she still offered the most vulnerable, sympathetic look toward Robby that he'd ever seen from the woman. It hit - in that moment alone - that he'd likely not see that face again, at least for a very long time.

"I love you like a brother," she sighed. "That's why I'm saying this with all the kindness in my heart: you need help, Robby."

He nodded. "He's the only man I've ever—"

"—Not for that," she interrupted, speaking like he was an idiot. "For what's goin' on in your *heart.* You run the most difficult clinic in the whole damn state, and you've been doing this for years now with no breaks. These patients don't leave you when they walk out of the clinic. You *absorb* their pain. You... take in their trauma. It sticks onto you. I can almost see it like a thickness in the air around you."

Robby fell silent.

"It's made you a real troubled man," she admitted. "Because the Robby I met five years ago wouldn't have pushed away so many people he cared about. Not like this. Not Collins, not me —not *Whitaker."*

"I know," he admitted, biting down on his lip in hopes of stopping the tears from spilling. "I'll get help."

"Good," she cooed, stepping out from behind the desk and closing the space between them. She took the man in a hug, rubbing his back as he sobbed silently into her shoulder. "You better be good to him when I'm gone, Robby."

He did not verbally respond—instead he nodded into her shoulder.

"And you better write me every chance you get," Dana said, pulling back and wiping a tear from his cheek. "You hear me, you big asshole?"

"I will," he promised.

"You better tell me all about the clinic. And all about your adventures. And all about how big and successful Collins gets when you bring her back in—you *better* bring her back in. When it's safe."

Robby nodded again.

"...And tell Whitaker I'm pissed off he didn't say goodbye to me. But I still love 'im."

Dana and Robby said their final goodbyes. When Adam pulled up, she dragged Robby out to say goodbye to her husband and her daughters, who sat politely in the back. When they drove off, Robby stood there in the dark summer night, feeling the silence swell upon him—over him. Like a warm wave creeping up his feet, up his knees, up his hips, until it had submerged him entirely.

Only then did he close his eyes. And in the blackness, he saw Dennis' face.

Robby turned and stormed into the clinic, rushing up the stairs and swinging the door open to his home. He ran over to his living room and tossed books around—tossed stray pages and rummaged. Once he found his journal, in which he'd written his confession, he clutched onto it like it was the last true writing in the world. Like if he let go of it, it'd disappear.

As quickly as he'd run up it, Robby scurried down the stairs, barging out of the door to the clinic and into the driver seat of his car. He kept the journal in his lap, never buckling his seatbelt as he drove damn-near recklessly, all the way through Franklin, toward Dennis Whitaker's home.

His determined heart did *not* sink when he pulled into the empty driveway, void of his lover's car. Instead, he clutched at his journal, stepping out and walking up to the little porch. Robby sat himself down, fidgeting with the pages of the journal as he challenged himself to remain composed.

His heart pounded imagining the words he'd written on the pages coming out of his mouth—but he knew they needed to be said. He needed to tell Dennis. He needed to fix what he'd begun to break between them. For his own good. He scanned the pages over and over, reciting each line like it was scripture. Like it was sacred. To him, perhaps it was.

Michael Robinavitch sat on that porch, waiting for Dennis Whitaker to return.

Several months later, deep into the fall of '62, Dennis lay under an old oak tree far out in his family's backyard. It stood tall at the edge of a forest which stretched on for a mile, riddled with jagged, rocky cliffs and patches of plains.

Behind his eyes, images of Tennessee flickered like the lights of a car streaking in bright color past his peripheral. Images of Robby and Dana and Heather melted together—it was like he was in mourning. Months had already passed since he ran back home, but the knife still sat deep in his gut. Or perhaps that was only the root of the oak tree, poking awkwardly into his back where he lay.

Dennis opened those tired eyes, allowing the shimmering light of soft evening sun to dance into his pupils, flickering and twinkling between reddening oak leaves.

His father finally passed away a few weeks ago. Adeline was bedridden for days. There was no formal funeral—Thane did not have friends who might attend. Instead, Dennis' brothers had come in along with their wives to bury the man at the family cemetery a few minutes south of the farm. Dennis did not go, and Adeline knew not to press him to go. Something seemed to click with her when the man finally passed away. In Dennis' eyes, it was like she'd been freed of a burden that she otherwise never would have escaped—a burden of love, when love was hardly left.

"You used to love reading under this old tree."

Her voice snapped Dennis from his thoughts, and he scurried upright, leaning his back against the trunk of the tree. Adeline held a pitcher of steaming apple cider in her right hand, the handles of two mugs hooked in the fingers of her left.

"Still do," he tapped the book in his lap.

"What's that one about?"

He glanced down at the cover. "It's... 'Principles of Internal Medicine.' Just a medical book."

"I know that didn't come from inside *my* house," she chuckled.

Dennis offered a weak smile. "No. It's from the clinic. In Tennessee."

"You used to love fiction," she reminisced, plopping down beside her son and handing him a mug, which he balanced on the cover of his book like it was a small table. "Used to bury your nose in it and sit out here for so long I'd have to rub aloe all over your face by the time you came back inside."

The boy wasn't sure what to say.

"You grew up quite a bit, didn't you, baby?"

"...I think so," he admitted. "Sure."

She didn't press further. Did not want to upset her son—the only son she had left at home. The only family she shared a roof with anymore.

"In some ways, you were right," Dennis broke the short silence. "About him."

Adeline knew who he was referring to.

The boy nodded as he spoke, "I do believe he's a good man—don't mistake me. Every single day of his life he works to save people. *Anyone.*" He paused. "...Anyone but himself."

"Well it ain't your job to save a man," Adeline stated, much like she was reciting something she hardly believed in anymore. "That's a woman's job."

Dennis turned to his mother. "Did you save daddy?"

She swallowed. Her lips pinched together into a pained smile and she blinked. Setting her mug next to Dennis' on the cover of the book, she lifted the steaming pitcher, carefully filling the sweet cider evenly into one mug, then the other.

"...I don't altogether know anymore," she began, more honest than she'd ever been, "if it should matter much who's doin' the saving."

Adeline looked up at her son with eyes like she was seeing for the first time—*allowing* herself to see for the first time, the boy that had raised himself. Seeing for the first time a figure that she hardly recognized, but loved no less.

Jaw loosening, Dennis' brows knitted together as he searched his mother's eyes for meaning.

"God'll love you all the same. So why shouldn't I?"

Those words forced an unignorable swell of emotion up from Dennis' chest. Hearing his mother pronounce her acceptance in such a way was earth-shattering. It was like hearing the bells of Heaven, gates opened and waiting for him. As the woman sipped into her mug, Dennis processed.

"You don't think it's strange?"

"I sure do," she chuckled. "I think it's unnatural."

He huffed.

"But I'm your mother. It ain't my place to push you away. Not for anything. Not like those Tennessee folk did."

Dennis chuckled softly, "They're not bad people, mama."

"My *ass,"* she kissed her teeth. "I know how bad you wanted out of here. Nothin' woulda sent you runnin' back unless it was really, *truly* awful."

"Honest," Dennis declared, "it wasn't so bad there. Real good people live there. ...It just wasn't *home."*

Adeline's lips pulled up into a cautious smile. "You realized *this* is your real home."

Dennis stared at his mug of steaming cider.

"No," he breathed out tentatively.

His mother's face fell softly.

"I don't think this is my home, either." Dennis looked up at Adeline. She knew, too. He could see it in her eyes: she knew what he'd say.

"You and Pa left me long before I left here. It... was never a home. Just a house."

A silence fell between them, interrupted only by Dennis' elaboration:

"I can't help but love you. And pa, too. Simon, Howard, and Mark. I can't will myself not to love you all. But I don't even know that I *should.* After everything. I don't know that I should have to subject myself to loving a family that I never truly belonged to. One that... did not know what to do with me."

His mother sat still as a stone, listening, with her fingers clamped tightly around her mug.

"I imagine it was easy enough raising my brothers. They're your first children. And they're normal. Not weak or different. But I was the afterthought, wasn't I, mama?" Dennis nodded. "It's why they're leading normal lives."

"Dennis," she sighed.

"Before you all went to pa's burial, Simon and Howard kept asking me questions I couldn't answer. Asked me why I looked so messy like I hadn't showered in days. Asked me why I hardly showed myself around town. Asked me why I came back at all, even." Dennis inhaled. "They meant well, I imagine. But those questions weren't any that I had answers to, mama."

He exhaled.

"I don't *know* why I can't get myself together. I don't know why I feel so ashamed to show my face around here."

"It ain't your home," she surmised.

Adeline's brows raised in realization. She truly, finally, saw what lay behind her son's eyes. The pain, the unknowing, the uncertainty. The country—the *world* was pitted against him, and he had no real way of navigating it. And she was of no help to him.

"It's not my home," he nodded. "...I stayed up every night as a boy. Praying that I could change. Praying I'd stop steering off the beaten path and rocking the boat. But those prayers weren't ever answered. I wanted to stop feeling so... different. Wanted to see some approval

in pa's eyes. Wanted to stick around my brothers without feeling guilty. Like I was marking their image."

Tears fell from Adeline's reddening eyes, and she tried quickly to wipe them.

"My sweet Dennis," she wept.

The emotion in her voice caught his attention. His eyes darted up, catching hers in a glance as she wept more.

"My little bird," she reached out, grabbing his cheek. "This is your cage, hm?"

Dennis Whitaker was, to Adeline, a delicate, fragile bird. And as she now saw it, Nebraska was his cage.

"I wish..." she tried. "I wanted to believe you came back because you needed me... I *wanted* you to need me."

He let go of a strained, prolonged sigh. He knew that pain very well—wanting to be needed. Robby had dug that knife into him months ago in Franklin.

She began to shake her head. "But you don't need me. Not any more than your brothers did. You just haven't found your footing yet."

"I do love you," he reminded. "Very much."

"I know," she pulled him into a hug, weeping into his neck as she assured, "I know."

He held his mother for several minutes, rocking her gently as they sat beneath the oak tree. Dusk had nearly settled over the skyline, painting the world above dark blue as clouds rolled in, casting dancing shadows on the sides of their faces, filtering the pink rays of setting sun.

"I think I always knew. Or maybe 'dreaded' is the right word," he said, pulling back and facing his mother again. "I always dreaded knowing who I am. I figured it out pretty young. But there are other things, too," he nodded.

"Other things?"

"There are other parts about me that I need to chase. Parts of me that I discovered in Tennessee. Parts of a person that... I need to become—*want* to become."

"What person do you want to become?" Adeline asked with a timid curiosity in her voice, watching the determination melt onto her son's face.

His eyes fell to his lap, landing on the book. *Principles of Internal Medicine.* It sat so very unassumingly in his lap, but it was the subject of every thought in his mind. Every silent moment he had between working on the farm, he'd open the book and read, just as he'd done years ago in Tennessee with every other book he'd been given. This one was the final one. The last book he'd been given to study before he left.

The book was a guiding light to him—a piece of the man he'd fallen in love with. That man's face and voice was nothing but a muffled echo in the back of his mind anymore, but his drive was the fuel in Dennis Whitaker's heart. His drive to help people. His drive to care. Dennis learned everything he knew from that man—witnessed his unwavering capacity to serve those in need, no matter what. Michael Robinavitch, without question, had become the north star by which he would follow for the next decade of his life.

Adeline looked down at the book that had Dennis' attention, then back up at him. For the first time since the day he was born, her son had the look of a man who knew exactly what he needed to do.

Pittsburgh, July 1972

"Mr. Dennis Whitaker?"

He stepped forward once called, resting his untidy stack of papers on the desk before him. "That's me."

"Hello," the woman behind the desk smiled courteously. "So," she glanced down at her own papers. "You're here to finalize everything for your rotation tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Internal Medicine, too? Hoh-oh..." she chuckled. "Presby's ED just got overhauled to *hell and back.* You'll be in and out of there a lot this month. It'll be a *real* fun time, if the things I hear about it are true."

"I've heard. I worked in a clinic," he nodded. "About a decade ago—a pretty chaotic one. So I figure it'll feel a little familiar."

"Oh, really?" She grinned. "Then you'll be just *fine*. In any case, they've got a great team in the ED. Now, I'm gonna get you set up here real quickly—won't take long. Let's just..." she sifted through her papers, adjusting her glasses with a knuckle before looking back up at Dennis, "make sure your paperwork's in order, to start."

"Yes ma'am," he smiled sheepishly.

"Have you got your student ID? Hospital badge?"

Dennis tugged both from the pocket of his cargo pants, laying them out for the woman. She nodded with a kind smile.

"Lovely. Keep those on you at all times in Presby. We don't want our student doctor getting tossed out! Now—immunization records are here... let me just confirm with you: smallpox vaccine?"

"Yes ma'am, got it a few years ago."

"Tetanus shots?"

"Got my booster last year," he nodded.

"Beautiful," she sang. "And I've got a negative TB test from you, as well. Flying colors, lovely, lovely. Okay—patient confidentiality. I imagine you've heard this a million times in your courses, so you know you'll be held to the *highest* standard with regard to patient privacy. What you see and hear in Presby ED stays in Presby ED, right?"

"Yes ma'am."

She nodded. "Amazing. And—oh! I nearly skipped over," she chuckled. "Current Pittsburgh address?"

Dennis blinked.

"Address?"

She nodded. "Address, yes."

"...Oh," he chuckled dry. "I—" he stammered.

The girl behind him in line shuffled impatiently.

Swallowing the nervous lump in his throat, Dennis asked, "Is it necessary? I've just... never needed it for my previous rotations."

"New standard," the desk lady smiled innocently. "You've got an address, haven't you?"

"I," his brows furrowed. "I—well... to be honest, I'm kinda *between* places. Could I put down... a previous address? Would that work?"

She shot an incredulous look at the boy. "No, Mr. Whitaker. I'm afraid I'll need a valid and *current* Pittsburgh address. That's just how it works."

He did not respond. His eyes darted around the room, behind the woman and to the clock on the wall. Down to her typewriter, ledger, and manila folders, which lay scattered across the massive desk.

"Mr. Whitaker?"

Dennis' world began crumbling beneath him. It was his final rotation of med school. How poetic that *now* would be the time he hits a wall. After everything he's been through. The lump in his throat began to feel suffocating, and his brows tangled together as he imagined how screwed he was. He was so, so very screwed.

"I don't..." he tried. "I don't—"

The girl behind him huffed dramatically, then shoved beside him to interrupt with: "312 Meyrick Street, Apartment 2. In Oakland."

Bewildered, he turned to the girl. She looked around his age, perhaps a little younger. Her hair was jet-black and pulled into a tight ponytail, skin totally clear, pupils dark. She looked a little annoyed.

"...Is this... *actually* his address, ma'am?" The desk lady cocked an eyebrow. "He just said he's between places."

The girl nodded. "He's a dork. *Real* socially awkward, too."

She looked at Dennis and nudged his side with her elbow, using some force as she urged, "Isn't that right, Huckleberry?"

Huckleberry?

Dennis squinted, but did not question her. Instead, he turned to the lady at the desk and tentatively nodded.

"Trinity Santos," she introduced herself, mostly to the desk lady, but inadvertently to Dennis, too. "He's my roommate," she nudged her head in his direction.

He added to the fib: "I'm just looking to move out soon. She's a very mean roommate."

She let out a teasing whistle. "I'm not mean. He's just *really* high-strung." She seemed to relish insulting Dennis, who she did not know; she spoke with a dramatic head nod and a crinkle in her nose.

"Proving my point," he chuckled nervously, still staring at the desk lady through squinted eyes.

The girl kept a polite smile on her face, but leaned in and whispered to him in agitation: "I just saved your ass, Huckleberry. I wouldn't call that *'mean'."*

"—I'll put the address down," the desk lady interrupted.

"Thank you," Dennis said, but he couldn't tell if he'd directed it to the woman at the desk, or the girl beside him.

"You should..." the lady spoke as she typed, nose pointed up, "...be all good. Your shift begins tomorrow at 7:00 sharp. Someone'll come in and take you from there. Sound good, Mr. Whitaker?"

"Sounds great. Thank you. So much."

He exhaled the nervous breath that had stayed suspended in his lungs.

"Wonderful. I hope Presby treats you well," she said with sincerity, but quickly directed her attention to the next person in line—the girl.

"Now, how about you, Miss..."

"Santos," the girl repeated with a nod.

"I assume you're also here for rotation?"

She shook her head and stepped up to the desk. "It's an internship. He's the med student," she pointed back at Dennis with her thumb.

Dennis waited at the door, listening to the strangely cocky girl speak. Listening to her fill out her papers and verify her information. He wasn't sure why, but he waited until she'd begun walking away from the desk, papers in hand, smirk on her face. His eyes met hers, and she seemed surprised he was even still there—if not a little disturbed.

As she passed by, he fell into step beside her, and the two of them walked out into the bright, summer light. The streets of Pittsburgh were busy and noisy. Traffic jammed in the road, and little crowds of people trickled by on the sidewalks.

"Shouldn't you be house-hunting?" The girl quipped insensitively, shooting a distasteful glance at Dennis.

"Why'd you do that in there?"

"Do what?"

"Whatever *that* was, I don't know." He shrugged. "You helped me."

"I gave you a fake address is all."

"It's *fake?"* He nearly yelled.

"No, dumbass. It's just not *your* address," she corrected like he was an idiot. After a pause, she turned to face him as they walked, squinting her eyes and raising a brow. "You didn't... you don't think I actually just offered you a place to stay, did you, Huckleberry?"

"My name's Dennis," he corrected timidly.

"You look more like a 'Huckleberry' to me. Sound like one, too."

"What's that mean?"

"Means you don't strike me as being from Pittsburgh."

"You're right," he stated. "Not that it matters."

"You from Texas?" She tried, almost offensively.

Dennis grimaced at her painfully wrong guess. "...Nebraska."

"Damn, so the middle of *nowhere,"* she sighed. *"*I helped you 'cause you sounded like you were gonna melt into a puddle if you didn't get into Presby." Trinity shrugged it off like it was nothing. "That, and you don't look like the type to rob me—or *murder* me."

The sun beamed down on Dennis' face as he glanced at the girl. "Thanks," he mustered shyly.

"Yeah. So, you're in for a..."

"Four-week rotation," he finished for her.

"Right. That."

"What about you? I heard 'internship' in there."

"Yep. Intern. First shift is tomorrow, bright and early. Guess we'll be working together, hm?"

"You're working in the ED?"

Trinity nodded. Then she stopped walking. Dennis stopped, too, looking at her. She was staring at a bright red red building—a sit-in pizza place.

"Say, Huckleberry," she mused. "You hungry at all?"

He glanced back and forth between Trinity and the restaurant.

"Can't afford it."

Trinity sighed. "I'll buy your slice."

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand there it is... after a whole month, we've come to the end of act 2. Thank you so much for supporting my story and reading along with each release. It means the world to me. This STORY means the world to me. And seeing it connect to so many people means the world to me, so thank you. <3

Well... now that we're 10 years into the future, Act 3 will begin next week to kick off the new year!!

Note: I've finished my little song for the story, and I'll be putting it on all streaming platforms just before the release of chapter 14 (the final chapter)

IMPORTANT NOTE: I've... decided on an ending. Tags have been updated accordingly. There shouldn't be many more tag additions/revisions as we near the end of the story, and if there are any, they'll be very small changes at most, I assure you.

Chapter 10: Les Fluers

Chapter Summary

Ten years after leaving Robby, Dennis struggles to let go of his past while a new friend pushes him to loosen up.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 10's song is "Les Fluers" from Minnie Riperton's 1970 album, "Come To My Garden"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So," Trinity spoke through massive bites of her spinach and feta slice, "your family shoves religion down your throat. They shut you out. You had enough of that. You moved to Tennessee all on your own. You almost *died* on a farm..."

"'Almost died' is a bit dramatic, I think—"

"—Whatever. You almost died. You get saved by the same guy that later takes you in and teaches you medicine at... his *own* private practice?"

"...There's a bit more to it than that... but," Dennis blinked, then nodded. He nibbled at his own pepperoni pizza slice.

"So you're a homosexual," she smiled.

Dennis nearly choked on his bite, dropping the slice in his hand onto the cardboard and looking around, as if to check if anyone heard the girl.

After a proper swallow, through the scowl on his face, Dennis hissed in a whisper: *"What the hell is wrong with you?"*

"What?"

"A—" he looked around, then leaned into the table. "A *homosexual?"*

"What?"

"Where is this coming from?"

Trinity snorted. "What the fuck else would *you* run away from home for? And also, it's kinda weird that a dude who put you in his bathtub just *happened* to take you on as his mentee a couple months later and trust you to work in his clinic with zero prior experience. That's damn near misconduct. No normal guy would risk his career like that."

"He... well, in retrospect, he wasn't much of a 'normal guy'." Dennis shook his head and winced. "But that's not the— I'm not a queer."

"Oh?"

"Yeah."

"My bad," she shrugged, chomping into an untouched side of her slice. "You be what you wanna be, Huckleberry."

Dennis sighed. He was quickly becoming complacent with the nickname, and he'd only known this woman for about thirty minutes. He turned to the window beside their booth, looking out at the busy streets full of people.

"So, why Pittsburgh? Sounds like you had it made in Tennessee, anyway."

"I'd heard a lot about it, is all. Also, I didn't come straight here from Tennessee."

"You moved *again?"*

"I moved back home," he glanced at the woman. "To Nebraska."

"Oh..." Trinity's lips curled down facetiously. "A breakup."

"Are you going to take me seriously? At all?"

"Sorry," she fleered, raising her hands in retreat. "Go on."

Dennis stared for a moment, eyelids slack with agitation.

"It was about ten years ago now. I had a... situation. And so I decided to move back home."

"Was that fun?"

"...No."

Dennis looked down at the table, frowning.

"My father had gotten a lot sicker since last I saw him. He died a few months later, actually."

"Oh. You liked your dad?"

"Not really," he smiled, but there was pain in it. "But... he was my dad."

"I get that," Trinity spoke with a hint of sincerity for the first time. "So, was med school a way of, like... taking *control* of it? Of what happened to him?"

Dennis cocked his head, pondered, then kissed his teeth. "Not really. I got the urge to pursue medicine when I was in Tennessee. The doctor who saved my life, he... was really good. I watched him a lot—the way he handled his clinic. The way he handled patients. Oh, and there was this lady that he took under his wing, too. She was like... a *prodigy. Way, way* better than me."

He watched Trinity from across the table as she chomped away at the remains of her slice.

"What brought *you* here?"

"Talent."

"...Right. But—I meant like, y'know," he gestured, "what led up to your internship. At Presby."

"I got a full-ride scholarship for my undergrad degree," she nodded. "I didn't actually realize I wanted to get into med school until *after* I started college. But I have the *'control'* thing."

"The 'control' thing," Dennis half-asked.

"Yup," she swallowed the last bite of crust. "We were poor growing up. I decided I didn't wanna live like that forever." Trinity shrugged.

"Money's why you became a doctor?"

"Well... among other things. But it's not really worth getting into," she chuckled. "It'd put you to sleep."

"Try me."

"No thanks," she offered a guarded smile.

Dennis blinked.

Redirecting the conversation swiftly, Trinity jabbed: "You're kinda dumb, hm?"

"'Scuse me?"

"Didn't you know they'd ask for an address? For your rotation?"

"Oh. I... well," he pondered. "In the past, others haven't asked."

"You mean you've been homeless for a *while?"*

"*Homeless,"* he tried on the word like an itchy sweater, cocking his head and squinting. "Not necessarily. Just— again, between places. I crash in the backseat of my car. What's left of it, anyway."

"Right." Trinity stared. "How long have you been 'between places,' Huckleberry?"

"...Little under a year," he shrugged.

"A *year?"*

"Yeah. It's really not a big deal. I just couldn't secure housing for fourth year."

Trinity shook her head. She took a greedy swig from her glass Coca-Cola bottle, then slammed it down and studied Dennis. "So you don't have anywhere *real* to stay?"

"I think worse things have happened."

"It probably *will* be the worst thing. Presby's no joke. And, I mean, you *heard* the lady at the desk, right? This whole field is changing. That ED's gonna be... like nothing we've ever seen."

"Yeah, I heard."

"To be honest, it's kinda weird to think we're at the forefront of it all."

"Isn't that pretty normal in Pittsburgh, though? It's part of why I moved here for med school," Dennis said.

"Moved *where?* You're homeless."

"You've reminded me a few times now."

There was a pause. They looked at one another in an odd stalemate, empty pizza plates laying in front of them on the table. Trinity broke first.

She let out an agitated sigh. She rolled her eyes, too. "Tell you what, Huckleberry."

Dennis squinted.

"You can crash in my spare room tonight."

"What— *really?"*

"Don't give me time to change my mind," Trinity snorted. "If you... *don't* weird me out or piss me off by the end of our shift tomorrow, I might let you keep the room for a little while."

He winced. "I can't. I couldn't pay you."

"You couldn't pay me for this slice, either," she remarked. "Find other ways of making yourself useful."

Dennis shot a look at Trinity that bordered on *terrified.*

"...Not like *that,* you dumbass," she sighed, then paused for a second before adding: "I'm not all that into men, anyway."

Dennis looked up, frowning at her.

"You're very open."

"Only around homosexuals," she shrugged.

"I *told* you, I'm not—"

"Right, my bad," she apologized nonchalantly, sliding out from the booth.

As she stood to her feet, Trinity sighed, stretching her arms and glancing out at the bright streets beyond the dirty restaurant window.

"Alright. Let's go get your shit."

Dennis scooted out of the booth and stood awkwardly, looking even more awkwardly at Trinity. "Are you... seriously offering me a place to stay?"

"Jesus, dude," she groaned.

"Okay, okay," Dennis raised his arms up in retreat."

Pittsburgh was a bigger city than Dennis had ever seen— save for Nashville the two times he'd ever passed through it. The sun seemed to shine at all times, and that was a hauntingly familiar sensation to him. That heat, the beaming rays of golden light, cooked him evenly as he and Trinity Santos sauntered across the city by foot.

As they passed by the road leading to Hill District, Dennis' eyes remained glued, boring holes through the street sign. Trinity took quick note.

"You know people in The Hill?"

Dennis did not immediately respond, so the woman flicked his ear.

"Ow—no. Not really."

She chuckled.

As they continued their walk past Hill District and into the more unkempt streets of Pittsburgh, Dennis began to lead them in a series of left and right turns. Hopping from one street to another, they continued until tall buildings cast cold shadows upon the streets, cooling the pale boy's cooking skin.

"Don't mean to sound like a dick," Trinity fidgeted with the belt hoop of her bell-bottom jeans, "but you're not taking me somewhere to kill me, hm?"

She looked around at the secluded, cramped parking lot they'd walked into.

"That's not funny," Dennis sighed, jamming his hand in his pocket and fishing out the key to his utterly *dead* car.

"Wasn't a joke," Trinity grimaced at the ugly old hunks-of-junk lined up in rows like it was a car junkyard. Only it wasn't. This was just a square lot surrounded and swamped by tall buildings.

She watched as Dennis jammed the key into the handle of the driver door, wiggling it like he had a grudge against it. His face contorted as he yanked and pulled, and in any other circumstance, Trinity would've laughed at the sight. But the car - *his* car - was absolutely pitiful. The thought of him having been living out of it for nearly a year was almost depressing, even to her.

"There's no damn way you've been living out of this tin can," Trinity shook her head, watching as Dennis finally yanked the door open with a painful metallic screech.

"I do," he stated. "No one ever bothers me here. Not sure what this lot was for, though. Guess that doesn't matter now."

"Let's just," she looked around, almost paranoid, "get your shit and go."

In the silence, interrupted only by distant honks and passersby hollers, Dennis lugged what few clothes and toiletries he had into his school bag, along with an impossibly thick stack of his textbooks. It didn't all fit, so he enlisted Trinity to help carry his notebooks, which she wasn't thrilled to do.

They began their trek to Central Oakland, which was a surprisingly short walk from the little abandoned lot he'd been sleeping in. Trinity guided Dennis through the streets, clearly familiar with the grounds. They passed students as classes let out, passing the massive and - very familiar to Dennis - 'University of Pittsburgh' sign.

He gave it a prolonged glance as he asked, "So you graduated this year?"

"I did," Trinity nodded, agitated that her hands were full of his belongings.

"How'd you keep your housing?"

"It's not school housing," she huffed. "It's an off-campus apartment."

"Gosh," Dennis gawked. "And I'm supposed to believe you grew up poor?"

"I very much did," she shook her head. "I just worked really *fucking* hard in undergrad. Lotta grants and scholarships, baby."

Dennis wanted to ask more—he knew well enough, that kind of drive did not come solely from a need not to be poor. There must've been something more to Trinity Santos' story than the woman wanted to reveal, but they'd only known each other for an hour, give or take; he decided to leave it alone.

Her apartment complex certainly wasn't anything fancy, but she kept her own apartment neat. It was clean, and very urban to Dennis. He'd never seen a view like the one she had on her terrace, jaw-dropped and nose pressed against the glass as he looked out at the street a few stories below.

"Girl," she sighed, rolling her eyes as she watched him gawk like a child.

The slam of notebooks on her kitchen counter was the only noise that pulled Dennis from his thoughts with a flinch.

"Your room's the one next to the door. It's got its own bathroom. And a walk-in closet. Not that," she squinted at his tiny backpack, "you'll need it."

"Thanks so much," he turned to face her, a touch of sincerity on his tongue. "For this. It's real kind of you."

"Okay," she chuckled dismissively, shuffling into her room. "You can unpack your stuff—or whatever."

After drinking his fill of the view just a little longer, Dennis shifted on his feet and shuffled timidly toward the door to his bedroom. *His own room.*

"Woah," he sighed, looking around at the space.

The bed wasn't big, but it was a bed. The closet *was* big. The bathroom looked a little untouched—dusty, perhaps, but it was a bathroom. With a shower, and a sink, and a toilet. And a mirror. He could see himself in a mirror that wasn't cracked like his rearview or stained like the many disgusting public restrooms he'd freshened up in this past year. It was a solid, clear bathroom mirror.

Dennis sat his school bag on the edge of the bed, watching as it pressed down onto the cloudy black comforter. After a moment, he unzipped it and began pulling out his clothes. He was lucky he'd just taken them to the laundromat the day prior. He pulled out his fresh pair of scrubs, laying them out on the bed. Then he pulled out his textbooks. At the bottom of his bag, he'd saved two more books— not textbooks. *Those* belonged to Michael Robinavitch, a long, long time ago.

He pressed his finger onto the cover of the red one, 'Principles of Internal Medicine,' and he ghosted his digits across it. After a moment, he pulled it out of the bag, holding it with both hands and reminiscing. He was in that man's hometown. He didn't think he was meant to end up in Pittsburgh, but the opportunity had arisen, and as hard as he'd worked in undergrad, he couldn't pass it up. It always scared him—the thought of moving to a place that had raised the man who changed his life, for better *and* for worse.

In the ten years since they'd last seen one another, Dennis thought about him almost every day. The man haunted him at every corner. Every page he turned in medical school. Every word he wrote on paper. Every hour he stayed up to hone his knowledge and his skill. He hated to admit it, but it was all in the name of a Michael Robinavitch that he thought he knew

—a Michael Robinavitch that he'd created in his mind. One that, in this past decade, had become something of a legend to him. An unsung hero. A myth.

Perhaps that intangibility was a form of coping for Dennis Whitaker—

"That doesn't look like a textbook," Trinity chuckled, leaning against the doorframe as she pointed. "Looks old as *fuck."*

Torn from his thoughts, Dennis blinked. Then he turned his head to eye Trinity. Then he eyed the book, and finally eyed Trinity once more. "It—" he stammered, "yeah, it's not from school."

"Hometown book? Parents had it stashed in their house?"

"Absolutely not," he chuckled. "My parents were the furthest thing from doctors," he raised the book up and pointed at the title. "It's a medical book."

"Oh," Trinity nodded, lips curled downward. "Rad."

"I, uh... got it from Tennessee."

Trinity gasped. *"Oh,* I see. Your doctor friend, hm?"

"My doctor friend," he nodded. "Yeah."

"Well, you know what they about old junk like that, right?"

"No?" Dennis raised an eyebrow.

"It haunts you like ghosts," Trinity widened her eyes theatrically, pushing off the doorframe and walking out into the kitchen.

Defensively, Dennis followed her out, book still clutched in his hand.

"It's not some necklace or old strand of hair or anything!" He stammered with embarrassment. "It's a medical book. I keep it 'cause it's good information—good *knowledge."*

"Huckleberry," Trinity pulled a grape from its vine in her fruit bowl and popped it in her mouth, chomping as she spoke: "Answer me a question, hm?"

He did not respond, eyelids slackening with agitation.

"When's the last time you *genuinely* read that book?"

"I—" Dennis licked his lips, shaking his head. Unable to answer after several awkward seconds of silence, he resigned with: "I dunno."

Trinity snorted. "You know what I think?"

"Do I *want* to know what you think?"

"I think," she started anyway, "you need to loosen up a bit."

"Loosen up?"

"Loosen up!"

"I'm loose."

"Don't say it like that," she grimaced.

"What?" Dennis shrugged.

"My point is: you're like a rubber band. You're so high-strung I really think one snap would send you flying across Oakland. And that *book?"* She pointed to the book still held in Dennis' hand. "That's a whole other situation. It's depressing."

"It's a book," the boy sighed.

"It's a cry for help." She popped another grape in her mouth and stepped forward. "I think you need to get out and dance a little tonight."

"Huh?"

"My street's got a lot of bars. There's this one place, The Gem... they've always got live music in the back room. Lots of people, dark room, everyone's doing their own thing."

"I'm not a 'party' kind of guy," Dennis scratched the back of his head nervously.

"Oh, *trust* me. I can tell," Trinity yawned. "Lucky for you, it's not a *'party.'* Think of it like a... like a blind dancefloor. No one sees you 'cause they're all doing their own thing in the dark. The music's too loud. The lights are flashing too much. They're too busy sipping the good stuff. You're basically in your own little bubble."

They stood in a stalemate for a silent minute. Trinity leaned on her kitchen counter, popping grapes in her mouth as she eyebrow-prodded Dennis, who stared like a cornered mouse, hugging his medical book tight to his chest for stability.

"...No," he finally decided, shaking his head. "I shouldn't. *We* shouldn't. We have to be at Presby at 7:00 tomorrow. It's just... not a good idea."

"We wouldn't be out that late," Trinity shrugged. "But... alright."

She stepped past Dennis with a sly look on her face, sauntering into her bedroom. He stood staring at the half-picked vine of green grapes in her fruit bowl, letting out the breath he'd been holding. Admittedly, he realized how unhealthy it was to have been so unsettled discussing the book. That alone lit up a bulb behind his eyes, shining a light on the stupidity of having held onto it for so long without ever having any real reason to. Sure, he had a lot of respect for its previous owner, but he also had a very complicated relationship with that man —or rather, what was left of that man in his mind.

"I'm gonna go, though!" Trinity called from her bedroom over the sound of fabric shuffling around. "I could use a drink and a little grooving to knock off the nerves of tomorrow."

"Will that be *safe?"*

She peered her head out from the frame of her bedroom door, apparently topless. She glanced at Dennis with quizzical eyes. "Why would it not be safe?"

"Well, I dunno. A woman walking in an urban area by herself, right? Isn't that—"

"—You think I can't handle myself, Huckleberry?"

Dennis blinked. Nervously, he stammered, "No. I— that isn't what I mean. I just..."

Trinity cackled, slapping the wall to keep herself from keeling over. "I'm fucking with you."

Dennis' eyelids slackened, unamused.

And so, the woman showered and finished dressing herself, stepping out to show off her outfit particularly theatrically for Dennis as he sat on the couch, scribbling in his notebooks and flipping pages of his textbooks. After receiving his tentative - and mildly confused - approval, she stepped toward the front door, jingly purse on shoulder.

Turning her head, Trinity instructed, "I'll be back before midnight, but I'm just gonna assume you'll be asleep by then. There's leftover pasta in the top shelf of the fridge if you don't know how to cook—it's a few days old, though... eat at your peril."

"...Thanks."

"And make sure the door is locked when I leave, okay? Sometimes this piece of shit doesn't lock right and I come home having to bet whether or not I've been robbed."

"Yeah," Dennis nodded, half-listening.

Noticing the lack of attention he was paying, Trinity sighed. She jangled the flimsy doorknob of her front door and stepped out into the world, leaving Dennis to himself in the silence. He allowed a few seconds after the slam of the door before looking up from his papers, leaning back into the couch and running his palms over his face.

The darker the sky became outside the glass door to the terrace, the livelier the street grew. Students flooded in waves, a cacophony of cheers and Friday night buzz filling the space between each tall apartment building—all muffled inside the little apartment.

A familiar loneliness crept inside his chest as Dennis allowed the noise to fall upon his ears. His eyes froze on a single word at the edge of his page, unable to continue his work. His brows furrowed into a soft frown and his lips curled downward, as if to brace for the dull, low ache of pain which had learned to gnaw at his insides over the last decade.

Dennis Whitaker was very isolated.

It was - perhaps for worse - by choice, too. He'd spent the last decade of his life expending blood, sweat, and tears to achieve the goals he'd begun to realize. Tomorrow's first shift at Presby's Emergency Department was the final stepping stone until the next chapter of his life, and yet it felt so very mundane.

His eyes finally moved, flicking to land upon the cover of Robby's old medical book.

The dull ache swelled inside of him. Everything he'd accomplished, he did for himself. He had no one to share the success with. He had no reason to celebrate his progress aside from the excitement of being one step closer to saving lives, but no man was wholly selfless—even Dennis would have liked to indulge a brag or two with a familiar face. But that was a difficult thing, when most faces he passed nowadays were altogether unfamiliar.

"Stop," he warned himself, digging his canine into his bottom lip to rip himself from that darkening trail of thought. *"Stop."*

He allowed a strained sigh to drag itself from his throat. His eyes could not peel away from the cover of the medical book. It was, oddly, difficult to ignore the validity of Trinity Santos' sentiment.

Perhaps Dennis *did* need to loosen up.

That night, Dennis Whitaker tried to loosen up, and it nearly killed him.

Weaving through crowds of excited students and passersby was a little awkward on his own. It made him feel small, but Dennis managed to slip out onto the street just below Trinity's apartment, taking it all in nonetheless. Music flooded from within several different bars and restaurants.

His heart pounded with the anticipation of having made a *choice.* It was like the fear of setting himself upon a path was worse than traveling the path itself. He'd soon slither his way into a crowded bar for no reason other than to pry approval from a woman he'd known only since afternoon.

Well, that wasn't *entirely* fair.

Dennis knew well enough that approval in itself did not mean much, especially not from Trinity Santos, kind as she was to offer him a roof and a bed for the night. What really haunted him was that damned book she pointed out. It didn't occur to him - even after a decade of clinging to it as though it were some dark scripture with the secrets to life itself - that it might've been holding him back, spiritually and otherwise.

It hadn't occurred to him that the ghost of Michael Robinavitch was still holding him back.

Perhaps it was pride. He couldn't gauge either way what it might've been, but *pride* came to mind as he assessed himself, stepping through the thickening crowds on the street. Pride that he refused to swallow. Pride that demanded he feign superiority over a man that had, in every way he perceived, rejected him in Franklin ten years ago.

"Sorry," he said, bumping shoulders with a man before bowing his head timidly.

Perhaps *pride* wasn't quite correct.

He was at least self-aware enough to know that if pride had anything to do with his inability to accept that Robby still haunted him, he'd have likely had a lot more of it to spare in other aspects of his life. But he simply *didn't:* Dennis was a pushover, and a timid little creature scurrying from library to classroom to bathroom to street. If he'd had any spare pride in his bones, he had plenty more urgent places to aim it than at a mere ghost from his past.

Unless, of course, Robby was a larger ghost than he wanted to admit.

Dennis scoffed at himself, shaking his head and pulling himself out of his mind, recalibrating as the world around him carried on.

Most of the open bars on the street were overflowing with men and women, many of which linked by arms like couples. All different colors and sizes of people, a thing that Dennis had only just recently become familiar with given his contrastingly conservative and rural upbringing.

As he stepped stiffly down the street, Dennis' eyes gravitated toward the only bar that did not seem like a one-way ticket to overwhelm; a bright, neon-purple sign hung over the massive entrance reading *'The Gem'* in cursive letters. It was by no means empty, but certainly less of a headache to navigate than the other options along the street. And above all other reasons, it was the place Trinity had mentioned. She'd likely be inside, which meant he'd know at least one person—it would be his cop-out for getting out of the house.

The Gem was lively inside, and three very unignorably attractive men in black mesh shirts shuffled around while they worked behind the bar counter. Tall men and women, and everyone in-between, passed by Dennis as he tried not to eye them. Men in wigs and makeup, women with their girlfriends and boyfriends, it was like a circus—colorful and rare.

The further he made it into the bar, the more prominent the live music in the back room was becoming. Trinity *did* mention that there was always live music, but Dennis' music taste - as he imagined, entirely presumptuous - wouldn't have aligned with the place he'd walked into. Still, before he knew it, he had a bright, unassuming drink in hand, ordered from the bar without *really* knowing what it was. He balanced it best he could as he shuffled to the back, where the crowds *really* began to thicken.

It was sweaty and hot, and Dennis was absolutely certain his drink had splashed over onto the backs of several unassuming partygoers, but no one seemed to care. In fact, he began to realize no one cared at all about him—he wasn't being watched. The music thumped and rattled every bone in his body from the hum of the floor, almost *forcing* him to move to the beat. Forcing him to melt into the groove of it all.

Dennis looked around almost desperately for Trinity Santos, hoping that she'd actually ended up in this place—*hoping* he wasn't alone. In the corner of his eye, two men - who were practically sucking the lips off of one another's faces - leaned against the black wall of the venue. It made Dennis' heart jump. Made him take a big, bitter swig of the exceptionally strong drink in his hand.

That was when the performer on the little stage cut through the noise with a new song.

"'Scuse me," Dennis said politely, and nervously, as he bumped into an older, taller man.

The man turned and looked at him, nodding to the slow, swinging groove of the song as it began. "Oh *hell,* I love this song."

They locked eyes, and the warm buzz of alcohol settling in his stomach gave Dennis just enough courage to maintain that eye contact. He was, however, too awkward to respond, so the man spoke again:

"You like to dance, frozen fruit?"

"What?" Dennis called above the increasingly excited roar of the crowd as the song's introductory beat became louder and louder. He took another embarrassingly large sip of his drink.

"It's Minnie Riperton!" The older man called out again, confusing Dennis more.

"I don't—"

"—Les Fleurs. Greatest hippie groove of the decade? Oh, come on. Dance it with me!"

"I'm not so good at—"

Interrupted by the man's guiding hand on his shoulder, Dennis stepped into beat, allowing the world to spin a little as the singer on the stage broke through the hypnotic thrum of the drums.

She sang, *"Will somebody wear me to the fair?"*

The man's fingers trailed more securely around Dennis, curling at the nape of his neck. He put his other hand on Dennis' waist, guiding them closer. It sent Dennis' heart into a beat like a racehorse, thumping far faster than the beat of the song.

"Will a lady pin me in her hair?"

Dennis looked around frantically, as if to assess if it was even safe to let his guard down like this. Safe to allow a touch from another man.

"Will a child find me by a stream?"

The man's face was hard to see in the dark of the venue, but he vaguely reminded Dennis - in physical appearance only - of a man he used to love. The only man he ever loved. It tugged at

his heartstrings just enough that he allowed himself to pretend—if only for a moment, that it was really him.

"Kiss my petals, weave me through a dream."

Dennis could feel the warm touch of the man's hand on his neck, caressing gently as he kept them in a sway matching the beat. Their shoes tapped against one another clumsily—it was clear that Dennis was not much of a dancer, but he did his part well enough.

"For all of these simple things and much more, a flower was born. It blooms to spread love and joy, faith and hope, to people forlorn."

The man did not speak above the singer, instead he grabbed Dennis' attention by tapping his middle finger on the boy's neck. When Dennis looked up, it was like the man was asking, with his eyes, if he was comfortable.

Dennis' jaw clenched. Then he nodded, tentatively.

"Inside every man, lives the seed of a flower. If he looks within, he finds beauty and power."

The instrumental began to swell, like it was building up to some big, anthemic, explosive chorus. The stranger took that as a kind of theatrical excuse to pull Dennis closer, closer, and closer. Their faces were mere inches apart, and it had become quite clear he intended to kiss Dennis right there in the middle of the crowd. Be it the alcohol in his system or the general overwhelm of the room, Dennis could not find it in him to care—until something far behind them caught his eye. Just as their bottom lips made contact, Dennis saw a glimpse of a burly man he could've sworn was staring daggers into his skull. Judgmental. Disapproving.

Just like home.

Dennis pulled away in a violent flinch, leaving the man he danced with a little startled.

"Sorry," he mumbled, but it was drowned out by the noise.

The man reached his hand out slowly, saying something that Dennis could not hear, but the boy stepped back again, stumbling as the world spun beneath his feet. He hadn't noticed how intoxicated he really was until that sudden movement; it was as though a wave of nausea had been holding itself at bay until he moved his head.

"No," Dennis shook his head. *"Enough,"* he spoke, unsure if he was talking to himself or someone else.

Robby's face burned behind his eyes as they squeezed shut. The face Robby had made in their final argument at the Franklin clinic, ten years ago.

The singer's voice cut through as Dennis stumbled backward through the crowd:

"Ring all the bells, sing and tell the people everywhere that the flower has come!"

Heart slamming against his ribcage, Dennis pushed past a woman and her friend, spilling his drink on the ground. No one seemed to notice or care but the woman. She tried barking at him, but he did not hear her.

"Light up the sky with your prayers of gladness, and rejoice for the darkness is gone!"

He stumbled and stumbled until his palms finally found purchase on a wall, leaning all his weight upon it, cheek smashing against it as he heaved. His immediate assessment was clear: he'd sipped that potent drink far too fast - especially for someone who never drank at all.

Dennis slid along the wall, trying to find the exit.

"Throw off your fears let your heart beat freely, at the sign that a new time is born!"

Unsure he'd actually make it out of the venue alive, Dennis' eyes squeezed shut. Then—and *only* then, did God send him a little rope, in the form of Trinity Santos, who finally bumped into him and grabbed him by his bicep.

"Woah," she chuckled. The humor didn't last long, though, when she realized how intoxicated up Dennis really was. Her next "Woah" was tinged with much more concern.

"Hey," she said, leaning down so her voice would reach his ear over the noise. "What the hell happened to you? Why are you *here?"*

"Wanted to loosen up," he bleated pitifully. "Too much blue drink."

Trinity groaned, "Jesus Christ."

The woman said goodbyes to her little cluster of friends, keeping Dennis' arm slung around her as she carried him out onto the street. The warm, summer air of night shocked the boy's system back into shape as he inhaled, bringing him back down - at the very least - to planet Earth. His heart still slammed in his chest like he'd been running from death itself, and his hands were clammy, curly little bangs clinging to his forehead all sticky-like. The whole way back, she prodded him with questions like she was on the clock giving a patient his exam. Aside from the alcohol, Dennis was mostly fine.

"You're lucky it's a short walk, dumbass," Trinity groaned, shuffling the weight of Dennis awkwardly so she could unlock the door to her apartment and shove it open with a kick.

"I'm sorry," he moaned sincerely.

She ignored it at first, lugging him onto the edge of his bed and panting. Glancing at the pitiful mess Dennis had become, Trinity's brows furrowed.

"What the fuck even happened? Weren't you gonna stay in tonight?"

"I'm sorry," Dennis tried again.

Trinity roll her eyes.

"You don't need to be sorry, Huckleberry," she tried to *sound* agitated, but beneath it was concern. "Just— what happened? Did someone try..."

"No," he shook his head. "No."

"Okay, well—"

"—I'm a coward."

"What?" She cocked an eyebrow.

"I ran away," he said, delirious.

Trinity assumed he was referring to The Gem.

"Yeah, you did."

"I *did.* I ran away. I shouldn't have. *I shouldn't have run away."*

"...Well," she tried very poorly to comfort the boy, "you're all good now."

Dennis let out a confusing little hum of approval.

When he settled into a wave of silence, Trinity stepped back out of the doorframe, letting out the air that she'd held in her lungs. She smeared her palms across her face, deciding not to go back out for the night.

"You owe me, Huckleberry. You're gonna... have to do dishes for a whole *week."*

"Yeah," he hummed into the sheets.

"Clean and vacuum, too."

"Okay," Dennis hummed again, putting up absolutely no fight.

"...Idiot," she sighed under her breath. Before she could walk any closer to her room, she stopped, swiveled, and called out: "We have to be up in nine hours. Better make sure you're all sobered up by then!"

Before stepping forward into her room, Trinity glanced over at the coffee table in the living room. Atop his textbook lay that damned medical book. *'Principles of Internal Medicine,'* closed and resting over the other like an indulged temptation. A tinge of guilt tickled at her heart, but before she could dissect that, she stepped one foot in front of the other, shaking her head and closing the door to her room behind her.

The next morning went quite smooth, all things considered. Dennis showered and dressed himself, enjoying the luxuries of his own bathroom—allowing those luxuries to drown the noise of last night from his mind. When he left his room and entered the kitchen, Trinity sat at the counter with a bowl in front of her. Baron Von Redberry box in hand, she poured the cereal in, then milk, and ate, all while Dennis watched.

"Get a bowl if you're gonna eat breakfast," she grumbled.

The sun hadn't even risen yet.

"I'm not much of a breakfast person," he smiled politely. "Stomach's sensitive in the morning."

"Probably *because* you don't eat breakfast," she raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe."

A soft silence filled the room as Trinity crunched away at each spoonful of sweet, berry-flavored bites. Dennis only broke that silence because he felt he needed to say:

"...Thanks for helping me last night."

Trinity looked up, jaw stopping its chewing for a moment.

"You wanna tell me what happened?"

Dennis' jaw clenched. It was clear he wanted to tell her, but only because he felt he owed Trinity—not because he *actually* wanted to talk about it.

"I," he sighed, scratching his eyebrow with one hand, fidgeting with the neck of his scrubs with the other. "It's nothing. It won't affect me again. I mean—it won't put you in a position like *that* again. Needing to babysit me, I mean."

She eyed him for a moment, trying to dig deeper into his pupil's for some hidden meaning, like she'd be able to read what really went on last night. But of course, there was no way of knowing on her own, so she sighed, stuffing another spoonful of cereal in her mouth and shrugging. Building her walls back up in preparation for the shift ahead, she offered a sarcastic smile and said:

"Good."

Dennis and Trinity walked into Presby separately, but were lumped together all the same with the other two new faces.

"I'm Victoria Javadi," the girl raised her palm with a fidgety smile. "MS3. We're all new, today?"

"Think so," Trinity looked around at the crowded waiting room, hand clutched onto the shoulder strap of her bag.

"Your name is..." Javadi tried.

"Dr. Santos," she nodded, nose held high.

"Doctor?"

She sighed. "Internship."

"Ah! Another resident?" The other woman cheered with a giddy smile, picking at her nail as she gave a little hop. The excitement wasn't well-matched, so she dialed it in quickly and suppressed her smile, opting for: "Dr. Melissa King. Well— *Mel.* Second year. First year at Presby, though."

Javadi eyed Dennis, pulling him from his focus on the dull ache behind his forehead. "Dennis Whitaker. MS4." He nodded with a sheepish smile for good measure.

A man sitting in the waiting chair next to them stood and impatiently asked: "You all work here?"

"First day," Trinity spoke first.

"Fucking hell," he groaned. "Can you get me in a room, *please?* I've been waiting for hours."

Javadi looked at the other three, perplexed. Then she looked at the man. Innocently, she said, "It's our first day. We're probably not allowed to—"

"So just get a real doctor to come take me in."

Mel tried chiming in, perhaps blissfully unperturbed by the man's sharp attitude. "We can certainly find," she looked around with an innocent little smile curled on her lips, "...someone." Her eyes locked on a woman, and she clapped once in excitement before trotting over, speaking quickly and pointing in the direction of the group.

Dennis blinked, noticing the woman's familiarity. It was unplaceable, but he *knew* her from somewhere. He'd absolutely seen her before. As she stepped over with Mel, avoiding tripping over the legs of sitting patients, she prepared a professional smile, nodding at the student doctors before focusing her attention on the man.

"Sir, could I ask your name?"

"Bill Adler," he grumbled, watching as the doctor flipped through pages on her clipboard.

"William?" She asked for clarification.

He nodded.

The woman took only a moment to tap the pen at the edge of the clipboard, reading his file, then she looked up. "Mr. Adler, we've got you in for some abdominal pain, I see. Exam's been done, and we're waiting for results on some lab tests. Until then, it's best we keep you out here to make sure patient flow remains... well, *flowing,"* she pinched her lips together in an impatient smile.

His nostrils flared. "How the hell does that make any sense?"

The woman gestured around the room. "I ask myself that same question every day. This department is rapidly evolving, and we're hardly able to keep up with the patients we see," she paused, perhaps a little dramatically. Then she leaned in close and spoke quieter, "but we *do* keep up. And we do everything in our power to help."

The words seemed to disarm the man. Dennis and the others watched, fascinated.

"If you'll have a seat, we'll be right here if your symptoms get any worse suddenly. Until then, let's wait on those lab tests and go from there."

She ushered him to sit, then redirected her attention to the fresh faces again. With a toothy smile, she gave everyone a once-over.

"You must be our Pittlings."

"Pittlings?" Javadi casted a confused smile.

"Fresh faces in Presby's ED, I mean," the woman nodded. "Apologies. I'm Dr. Samira Mohan."

A light flickered behind Dennis' eyes. He *knew* that name—knew those eyes. She'd visited Robby's clinic in Franklin over a decade ago while she was in med school. He vividly remembered assessing her in the waiting room, masked up and sick as a dog, visiting from her campus in Nashville. How odd that she was here in Presby all these years later. As an attending physician, it seemed.

"...And you guys are?"

The group introduced themselves once again, far more formally this time.

"Victoria Javadi, MS3."

"Trinity Santos, intern."

"Dr. Melissa King, second-year resident," she smiled.

Lost in thought, staring awkwardly at Mohan, who he'd still not wrapped his head around having recognized, Dennis simply stood there. Trinity nudged his side with her elbow, eliciting a flinch from the boy. His ears flushed red and he cleared his throat.

"Dennis Whitaker," he paused. "MS4."

Dr. Mohan gave him a fascinated look, cocking her head. It lasted only for a moment, though. She was quick to return her attention to the group as a whole, guiding them through triage and explaining the ropes of Presby's ED to them.

"You're gonna meet a lot of doctors and nurses today. Listen to all of them," she nodded. "They're here to help, but so are *you.* Our job is to save lives and do so in the smoothest way

we know how."

Dennis wondered if she recognized him. More than that, though, he still wondered why she was here. It couldn't have been anything more than a funny coincidence, but it was a *very* funny one.

"Speaking of which," Dr. Mohan stretched her arm out, pulling another male doctor over by his bicep and guiding him in front of the group. "The first one I'll have you meet is Dr. Langdon."

"Hello," he nodded.

The man's face was firm and rigid, hair well-kept over his forehead. He seemed a little surprised to have been pulled over, but locked himself into the moment nonetheless, casting a smile upon the Pittlings.

"Dr. Langdon, I'm so sorry, will you show them around? I've gotta get back to a patient inside."

"Will do."

Mohan offered one more kind nod to the group before hustling off, disappearing beyond the door into the main floor.

Turning back, eyes landing on Mel, Langdon cleared his throat. "I'm Dr. Frank Langdon, senior resident at Presby." He was a little awkward, but gestured around him. "So! This is our front room. Patients will check in over at the desk," he pointed, "and we have nurses in and out of the area to make sure they're not gonna keel over imminently," he chuckled.

Dennis clenched his jaw. Hearing that, especially as nonchalant as it was, sent his guard up. He knew he'd be dealing with a department that involved many potential casualties - it *was* the emergency department, after all - but facing that reality head-on was always different than anticipating it internally.

"If the ticker ain't stopping anytime soon, we move them to a triage room for a quick exam. Labs, X-rays, vitals."

"You've got triage *rooms* here?" Mel gawked, fascinated.

"Fancy, hm?"

"Very," Dennis chimed in, noting the luxury of such accommodation. An accommodation they certainly did not have at the clinic in Franklin all those years ago.

Langdon turned to Dennis, interest piqued. "You worked in many emergency departments before, Mr. Whitaker?"

Dennis shook his head. "Just a clinic back in '62."

The senior resident nodded, lips curled downward. "Rad. Y'think it was as busy as all this?"

Awkwardly, Dennis looked around.

"In its own way," he settled with a distinct lack of confidence.

"Is it always... like this?" Javadi asked, noting that she'd never seen such a busy department—so many patients shuffling around and *being* shuffled around.

Langdon ushered them through the doorway and into the main floor of the Presby ED, where the lights became far harsher and the tiled floors became blindingly white. "It's... an evolving realm of the medical world. *'Busy'* is only the first of the obstacles you'll find in Presby."

Langdon turned the corner, guiding the Pittlings into the hectic main area at the center of it all—the nurse station. As they approached the desk, surrounded by doctors and nurses, Langdon finished his little tour with: "So it's a good thing you're in good hands with Dr. Robby."

"Wha—" Dennis blurted, but shut his mouth as quick as it opened.

Trinity casted a look at him, raising her eyebrow. As they made their final steps toward the desk, a nurse stepped out of the way and scurried into a patient room, revealing Michael Robinavitch—*his* Michael Robinavitch—sitting in a chair, staring down at a patient chart with a pair of black reading glasses over his eyes.

Dennis froze.

Every cell in his body seemed to halt, crashing against the confines of his skin, nearly sending him forward and onto his knees. It was like the world had stopped turning, and he was to be hurtled into the nearest wall at speeds that'd flatten him into nothing more than a red stain. Only, that was very certainly *not* happening; the ED and its busy bees continued shuffling around like normal, and the world kept spinning, all while Dennis drank in the sight of his clearly aged ghost, sitting so very unassumingly in that chair.

His first thought was that it was all, naturally, a dream. Perhaps he didn't actually land a rotation at Presby—perhaps he was just sleeping and he'd wake up back in Nebraska by the end of it. Unfortunate it was, that his sweet dream had turned into a nightmare in mere seconds, heart pounding as he eyed the man.

Robby stood from his chair, offering no more than a casual glance at Dennis before nodding to everyone—a glance so casual he must've *known* he'd see Dennis. The mask of professionalism sat tight upon his face. He was as tall as Dennis always remembered, rubbing his hands together after pulling his glasses off. It shouldn't have been jarring to Dennis that Robby wasn't - at least outwardly - surprised to see him; it was fair to assume that an attending physician would know, at least by name, which new faces would be coming into his department month by month. But yet, it *was* jarring.

Robby seemed entirely unfazed.

"New faces, hm?" Robby spoke, voice more gravelly than Dennis remembered, but dark and sweet all the same.

"New faces," Langdon nodded, taking his proud place by Robby's side.

"Welcome. Good morning, good morning."

Robby gave a look, prompting the Pittlings to - for the third time - introduce themselves. They did it quick this time, like a recital of words they'd long since tired themselves of saying.

"Trinity Santos, intern."

"Victoria Javadi, MS3."

"Melissa King. Everyone calls me Mel," she smiled. "Second-year resident."

Finally, Robby looked over to Dennis, eyes boring holes through the boy's skull in anticipation.

"...Dennis Whitaker," he recited shakily. "MS4."

Eyes fixated solely on Dennis, Robby offered a professional, unreadable smile.

Meant for everyone, but directed like a soft light at the boy, Robby said: "Nice to meet you."

After one more pause, he declared, "Welcome to The Pitt."

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to act three, the big final act, hehehehe

Thank you guys so, so much for all the support on this fanfiction. I genuinely read every comment you all leave, and I smile and I sometimes tear up and it's so beautiful seeing how deeply you guys relate to this story and its characters.

Chapter 11: Weird Fishes

Chapter Summary

Faced with Robby for the first time in ten years, Dennis' first shift in Pittsburgh's busiest emergency department goes terribly wrong.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 11's song is "Weird Fishes" from Radiohead's 2007 album, "In Rainbows"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This would quickly become one of the worst days of Dennis Whitaker's life.

"My name is Dr. Michael Robinavitch, but most everyone here at Presby calls me Dr. Robby."

It had already secured top five.

"You've met Dr. Langdon," he gestured to the man, who waved with cocky eyes. "And this is Dr. McKay. They are your senior residents. You report to them, they report to the attendings, myself *and* Dr. Mohan, who I'm sure you four met on your way in. Now, over here," he pointed to an older lady with crimson red hair, busy on the phone, "is Flora Pender. She's our charge nurse. Real sweet lady, but you better listen to her like lives depend on it, 'cause they do."

Robby's unreadable eyes rarely left Dennis. When they did, it was only a brief, blink-and-miss glance, like he was trying to remain composed, but unable to quit drinking in the sight of the boy.

The third time their gaze connected, Dennis' heart *really* stopped, and he jerked his eyes away, unable to control the stress-twitch in his fingers.

"'Emergency medicine,' as some of us in the medical field are calling it," Robby cut through Dennis' derailing train of thought, "is pretty new to us all, and Pittsburgh's sort of the home of development. That means we are the test monkeys of a *chaotic,* evolving system that, frankly, is gonna knock your socks off."

Langdon leaned his weight on the desk behind, making it visibly clear - not unlike a statement - that he was familiar enough with Robby to invade his bubble. Familiar enough to

cozy up with a puffed, arrogant chest. Dennis made note of that, and had no idea why.

Perhaps top three.

"Here at Presby, we've got trained and certified EMTs, or Emergency Medical Technicians, and paramedics who provide advanced medical care to patients, from ambulance to hospital. Our job here in the ED is to stabilize our incoming patients and keep them alive long enough to see specialists. That means we take on a shit-load of cases every single hour." He paused, offering daggered glances at everyone in front of him. "Some of which cases," Robby nodded, "will *change* you."

Hell of a warning to administer, mere minutes before these poor students began their first shift.

"Today'll be nonstop, and a lot of it's gonna feel like a madhouse. So work together, communicate, observe, listen, and absorb it all."

Mel was already nodding with an excited, innocent grin on her face. Javadi and Santos seemed a little unfazed.

Dennis could not look Robby in the eyes.

"Let's go save some lives."

The Pittlings were immediately thrust into the action.

Dragged into the minor treatment area, Dr. McKay guided them with Dr. Robby to a simple room. Dennis had zero time to process that the ghost from his past stood right next to him, close enough to touch. Real. Flesh and blood.

"Mr. Dever, do you mind if I walk some student doctors through while we get you fixed up?"

"If it gets me outta here faster, *fuck,* I don't care," the stinking man slurred. He reeked of alcohol. It swallowed all the air in the room.

McKay blinked. "...Perfect."

She turned to the group, then began with a professional smile: "Jared Dever. Assault victim who came in with some minor facial injuries, and is otherwise stable. Patient is intoxicated, so as you can imagine—"

"—I din't even drink tha' much," he mumbled, swatting his hand, "crazy lady. Crazy fuckin' lady."

"As you can *imagine,"* McKay continued, "he's been a tad uncooperative."

"Does he not need..." Javadi leaned closer to McKay and lowered her voice, "restraints?"

McKay didn't love that Javadi asked in such close proximity to the patient, but she hid that well. "We like to make sure *everyone's* in safe hands - doctors and nurses included - before handling cases like these. So if need be, we can. But Mr. Dever here hasn't been that much trouble." She looked at the man with a smile as she said his name. "Just a yapper."

"But he needs to be sober before any serious examination can be done," Trinity surmised.

"Exactly." McKay turned back to Mr. Dever and shuffled over to the side of the bed, checking vitals as she spoke. "Even with minor injuries like Mr. Dever's, we don't want to discharge before giving him time to sober up and allowing ourselves to do a thorough exam, because, simply put, we *don't* know what's going on inside his body. Beneath the surface."

"I feel fine," Jared Dever spoke, though his babbling indicated otherwise.

"I bet you do," McKay nodded, leaning upright again and flicking the clipboard in her hand. "But get cozy. You're gonna be in here a while."

The man groaned, then looked at Dennis and the others. "This place is fucking *noisy."* Then he turned, eyes landing ambiguously between Mel and Javadi as he said, "Least you got a good supply of eye candy."

"Okay," Dr. Robby sighed, arms crossed with a kind of disappointment. He hadn't moved from his spot next to Langdon, simply observing as McKay taught. His eyes, however, remained on Dennis as much as possible. The kid could feel it on the back of his neck.

"Lest you scare off my student doctors, Mr. Dever, we're gonna step out and let you sober up." Dr. Robby concluded, ushering them out of the room. Quietly and efficiently, he whispered to McKay, "Have a nurse check on him every quarter hour... *male* nurse."

Dr. McKay nodded and stayed behind, calling for nurse Jesse.

Langdon took the lead now, guiding the Pittlings into another room several steps down the hall, where a man lay still in the bed. He was hooked up on IV fluids and had simple machines monitoring vitals. Dennis tensed a little, but the man opened his eyes, and they lit up having seen the doctors arrive like angels.

"Patient is Phillip Herron. Fell three stories and hit his head at a construction site in Hill District. I've got," Langdon pulled a sheet from his clipboard, flashing it to Dr. Robby, who adjusted his glasses and squinted, "his X-ray."

The Pittlings huddled behind Robby, peeking at the picture.

"Linear skull fracture," Dennis mumbled.

Robby didn't turn, but he *did* nod. Langdon hummed with approval, smiling back at the med student before pointing at the offending injury on the picture.

"Skull films *do* show a linear fracture just over the parietal bone."

Robby hummed. "Call down a neuro consult." He looked up, peeling his glasses off and speaking softly, "Mr. Herron, we're gonna have a specialist come down and help assess the extent of your injury, alright?"

"Is it... *serious?"* Phillip shuddered, teeth clattering.

"It could've been a hell of a lot worse," Dr. Robby assured, placing his hand on the foot of the bed comfortingly. "But you *did* bonk your noggin. We like to be safe around here, so we're gonna get word on what the best course of action is. Alright, my friend?"

"...Okay," the patient breathed nervously.

Turning to Langdon, Robby whispered, quick and quiet: "He'll need neurological checks every fifteen minutes, and as far as I'm aware, neuro's tight today. He's gonna be laying here awhile."

Langdon nodded with a stoic look on his face.

Mel cleared her throat with fingers pressed to skin, "I could hang back and help. At the VA we had a lot of head trauma cases— elderly patients fall quite often. I could be of use," she added innocently, almost bubbly.

Searching for Robby's approving eyes - which were, in fact, present - Langdon looked between the two of them for a moment before nodding. "Great," he smiled, then turned to the patient. "Mr. Herron, Dr. King and I are gonna keep you some company, alright? We'll wait for that specialist together."

Robby ushered the remaining Pittlings out of the room with a playful "Let's go, let's go," walking them down the hall until they'd once again reached the massive nurse station. At the same time, Dr. Mohan sauntered out of a room from the opposite side of the hall, hands in pockets, eager smirk on her face.

"Dr. Robby, do you mind if I steal your students for a left shoulder GSW? I think it'd be a good warm-up for the day," she raised her eyebrows. "He's very *cooperative,* too," she spoke the words like they were carrots on a stick.

"Good timing," the chief attending was already nodding, rubbing at his scruffy beard. Dennis had only just noticed—the man had begun to grow *grey hairs.* There weren't many, but there *were* grey hairs.

"A shoulder GSW is a little simple for a warm-up, no?" Trinity protested with an unamused face.

Dr. Robby turned to the intern. "Simple is rare around here, Dr. Santos. Savor it."

There was a kind of sternness in his tone that set Trinity straight. She swallowed, then nodded. Dr. Mohan cast another smile - as professional as usual - then began walking down the hall. Trinity, Javadi, and Dennis followed like little ducklings.

"Whitaker."

Dennis stopped, watching as the others continued forward without him.

He hadn't even made it five steps forward.

Dr. Robby was already behind him, before he could protest or squirm his way out of confrontation. Of course, he knew he'd have to talk to Robby at some point, but he didn't expect it to happen so immediately. And he *certainly* didn't expect Robby himself to initiate. As he mustered the strength to turn around, albeit slowly, Dennis looked up into his eyes. For the first time in over a decade, he looked right into the man's warm, familiar eyes, resentment faltering.

The world around them fell impossibly silent, and both men were afraid to be the one to break it.

Robby followed the light behind Dennis' eyes. That light had once led him to the edge of the world.

"Pittsburgh?"

There it was.

He knew Robby would wonder how he ended up in the man's hometown. Truthfully, he'd convinced himself the decision hadn't actually had much to do with Michael Robinavitch. In a way, that wasn't untrue. Dennis had been looking to drown himself in work, and Pittsburgh seemed a *very* good place to start when he began med school.

He chased, for years, a dream of impossibility. It kept him from dreading the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, because how could one dread such light, if one knew the tunnel never ended? That simplified a lot for him.

Overworking simplified a lot for him.

"I wouldn't have taken this position if I knew you were in town," Dennis responded almost sardonically.

"Oh, I'm sure," Robby remarked with excessive honesty. "But you're here, so... why Pittsburgh?"

Dennis impatiently tapped his fingers at his sides, speaking like it was obvious: "It's diverse. Good medical field, nice people— *great* food."

"Nothing to do with me?" Robby half-joked.

That he even uttered those words, Dennis scowled.

There was a pause which stifled their rhythm. Dennis swallowed nervously, but stood his ground nonetheless. Still, it was Robby who, against his better judgment, prodded further:

"I assume you drove back to Nebraska. That night."

"...I did."

"Did it treat you well?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

The older man cast a look, as though that answer wasn't *really* an answer. He always figured Dennis would've made it into med school, regardless where he ended up after that fateful final night in Tennessee. That was a given. What he actually meant, selfishly, was *'have you been hurting as bad as I have all these years?'*

But he'd never ask it aloud.

"What do you want me to say?" Dennis asked, squirming under the older man's quiet gaze.

Robby snapped out of it. "No— it's good to see you. To see you're doing well."

Before Dennis could respond, a charred man was wheeled into the main hallway from ambulance intake by two overworked EMTs. He and Robby hurried over to the stretcher as it barreled toward them. Like vultures to a carcass, two nurses flocked around, keeping up just as well as Robby and Dennis did.

"Patient is Teddy, in his late 20s. Got burned in a gas tank explosion, but no smoke inhalation. Vitals stable en route, about 90% BSA," the female EMT noted. "We managed to get a 20-gauge in his right AC, already pushing LR."

"Trauma one's open," a nurse called out from somewhere behind as they raced further into the ED.

"Princess," Robby commanded, and she scurried ahead into the room. He shot a look up at the male EMT, then looked at the other nurse by the stretcher, Perlah, who'd already begun her examination.

"Vitals are good, heart rate is 138 bpm, BP is stable. Respiratory rate is around twenty-four," Perlah looked up, watching as the man struggled.

"How are we feeling, Teddy?"

"Can't feel much," his voice was like sandpaper.

Dr. Robby then directed his attention to Dennis, who looked frantic. "What do you see, Whitaker?"

"Uh..." he stammered, "Burns are mainly third degree," he looked closer, brows furrowed, struggling to ground himself.

Robby noticed the med student's unease.

As they entered the room and settled the patient, Dr. McKay rushed in, relaying: "He's got singed nasal hairs and soot in oropharynx."

Dr. Robby nodded.

"Let's set up for intubation," McKay continued, gloving herself and stepping to bedside. "Whitaker, Parkland Formula, okay?"

Dennis nodded, reciting that term in his mind. *Parkland Formula.* It had only just recently been developed. A formula they could wield to estimate the fluid required for a burn patient's first day to ensure they remain stable.

Thank you Charles Baxter, he thought, while scribbling into his dinky notepad.

Dr. Robby glanced behind Dennis as Trinity barreled into the room, nudging shoulders with Dennis as she examined the burn victim who lay writhing. The boy had a look on his face when they'd first wheeled the patient in—a look that didn't sit well with Robby. It looked like he'd been caught in headlights, like he wasn't prepared for such a case. Wasn't prepared to see it all so *suddenly.*

Dr. Robby redirected his attention briefly and cast a nod at Princess. "Start morphine." Then he stepped back as he continued, "page burn unit. I'll be back for intubation. Whitaker, finish Parkland Formula then step out if you need to."

Step out? Dennis' eyebrow twitched.

It was such a casual, off-handed comment, but it dug right under his skin. Robby saw that reaction, too. As he passed by, he leaned just enough to whisper low in the boy's ear, "Get it together," then walked out of the trauma room like he'd said nothing at all.

Dennis finalized his calculations - all the while, juggling Robby's select few words in his mind like heavy weights - and gnawed at his bottom lip while McKay guided Trinity to prepare for intubation. Princess monitored the machines at the head of the bed.

"Update me on fluids, Whitaker," she called, turning to the med student.

"Yes," he nodded, forcing himself down to Earth as he scanned his little notepad with scribbles. "Per the Parkland..." and he fired away, stating his calculations, eyes flitting back and forth between the notepad and the doctors in front of him, who responded quickly to each number he spoke.

Dennis surprised himself, having found his tempo so quickly.

McKay offered him a few proud head nods as he finished calling out his calculations, and Princess made adjustments to fluids accordingly.

Trinity snorted, voice coated in her usual playful sarcasm as she said, "Good counting, Huckleberry."

"Okay," McKay sighed, hands on her hips as she gently pushed past Trinity. "Let me find Dr. Robby and we'll intubate."

She stepped hastily out into the hall, closing the space between Teddy's room and the nurse's station, where Robby stood, scribbling at breakneck speed into his patient log.

Charge nurse Flora Pender called out to the man from her chair: "Robby, honey. Jefferey was looking for you a minute ago."

With pursed lips and a shake of his head, he groaned, "Starting early today, hm? I've got the energy, but *not* the time."

"Go easy. That's our CMO. You piss him off, he takes it out on all of us."

Robby kissed his teeth, "Not that he's supposed to—"

"Dr. Robby," McKay interrupted, halting at the edge of the desk. "We're ready."

The man offered a playful glance at Flora and shrugged. "Saved by the bell."

"You're gonna have to talk to the man at some point!"

"Tell him to come find me, then."

He and McKay barreled back into Teddy's room, and he spared Dennis a mildly confused glance, like he *wanted* to tell the kid to step out, but decided not to. Not immediately. Dennis caught that glance, though. It set him on edge once more, tempo lost.

"Alright, Teddy. We're gonna need to put in a breathing tube now to prevent your throat from swelling and making it difficult to breathe," Robby began, then paused to spare yet another glance at Dennis. "Whitaker, earlier you referred to Teddy's burns as third degree. We refer to them as full-thickness or partial-thickness."

Trinity's brows furrowed, eyes flitting between the two men, noticing the stare they shared.

"...Yes sir," Dennis nodded.

As wrappers crinkled and metal scraped against trays, McKay and Princess helped prepare the tools for intubation. Dennis stood back, but he watched as Dr. Robby's attention finally settled upon Teddy. It *morphed,* too. Robby's jaw clenched, and he seemed to tense as he examined the patient's body, like he was coming to some sort of *realization.* A kind of realization that he couldn't, until that very moment, fully confirm.

As the older man's head whipped back up and his eyes met Dennis', the boy flinched, looking away and pretending he wasn't staring.

"Whitaker," he called from across the room.

Dennis willed himself to look back into Robby's eyes. "Yes?"

"I want you to step out on this one," he declared.

Frankly, not the words he expected to hear.

The room fell oddly silent. McKay looked up. So did Princess. Trinity crossed her arms, eyebrow cocking even higher than it had already been as she studied the attending and the med student.

"What?" Dennis stuttered.

"Step out," Robby repeated sternly.

Michael Robinavitch, he decided, was out to get him.

Dennis dreaded that possibility, but hadn't ruled it out. Not from the moment he laid eyes on the man when the day started. A sinister voice in his mind would argue Robby had a *right* to have a kind of grudge against him, too. After all, Dennis ran away from Franklin, effectively leaving Robby with no assistance at his - increasingly busy by the year - clinic. A grudge was a simple and plausible explanation here.

Alas, he did not struggle against it—Dennis Whitaker was not the kind of man to put up a fight at all, let alone against a chief attending in front of a patient and three other co-workers. That would've been a kind of suicide, regardless how comfortable he may have been laying into Robby if they were alone.

More peculiar to him anyway, was his distinct *lack* of willpower to fight. Instead, in place of that boiling rage which, perhaps, should have festered, was a heavy, dull ache.

It was an ache that forced him to tug at the neck of his scrubs, wincing as he obediently nodded.

The first thing he did was lean against the closed stall in the restroom.

Sinking his teeth into the skin of his knuckle, Dennis forced out the anger that had simmered in that short walk. He couldn't even - more frustratingly - determine if the anger was because of Robby's order, or because of his own unwillingness to fight against it.

Not that he should have felt comfortable fighting against it.

But equally, not that Robby should have felt comfortable *administering* it.

After hardly three minutes of that rather unrelaxing silence, Dennis washed his hands, then meandered toward the patient board like a dog with its tail between its legs, hands clasped behind his back as he squinted up at the small letters. He leaned into the edge of the desk, letting the pain drown his shame and his frustration as it dug into his stomach.

"There's a big, dark cloud over your head, baby."

"Sorry?" Dennis asked, blinking as he focused his eyes on Flora's bright red hair.

The fluffy older woman wheeled over in her rolling chair. "Looks like you fell ill with a case of the *blues."*

"Ah," he nodded in understanding.

"You're Dr. Whitaker, right?"

"Just mister. No doctor, yet. Not for a few more months," he mustered a weak smile.

"Well, what's got you down, Mr. Whitaker?"

Dennis *really* contemplated being honest for a moment. Just tossing Robby under the bus and blurting his concern for - what he strongly believed to be - the man's grudge against him.

But alas, his tail was still tucked between his legs.

"I'm alright, ma'am."

"Call me Flora. *'Ma'am'* makes me feel old."

"Flora," he corrected himself softly with a kinder smile. "I'm alright."

She didn't verbally respond, but she *did* offer him an unconvinced glance.

"Thanks for checking on me," he tried, with all the sincerity he could muster. "It means a lot."

"Y'know, baby," she coddled, almost maternally, "first days are never easy. It's okay to drag along a little."

"...Right," he admitted, pressing on the dent in his knuckle that his teeth had left.

"What *isn't* okay, though," she continued, "is leaving yourself on a little island. Doctors - student ones, *too* - can be fantastic at saving others. Piss-poor at saving themselves, though."

A little huff of air, maybe even a soft chuckle, escaped Dennis' nostrils as he finally offered the older lady a *real* glance. "I've heard that before. I'd say it's true."

"Oh, I *know* it's true. Take Cranky-Robby for example. You'll get to know him while you're here."

"What about him?" The boy felt ashamed at how quickly his interest had been piqued.

"He's a good example of what happens when you don't take care of yourself, is all I mean," Flora snorted. "Always grumpy, always snappy. He's lucky he's fine at sweeping it under the rug, when it matters. But... don't take it personally. He just gets like that some days."

Dennis' lip twitched.

"How, uh," he worked up the courage to ask: "How long has he been working here—"

"—Excuse me?" A ghostly pale woman tapped on Dennis' shoulder, grabbing his and Flora's attention.

"How can we help, honey?" Flora leaned into the desk.

"My—" she choked up, wiping tears from her red eyes. "My husband's here. Teddy Miller? I was in the shower when they called the landline. They said he was in a," another choked sob, "serious accident?"

Dennis' heart plummeted.

As quickly as shining Flora Pender had nurtured him back upright like a sunflower, again he wilted.

"Let me see," Flora pulled her clunky glasses up, reaching for the patient log.

"He's in trauma one," Dennis interjected, stopping Flora's search. "He's being intubated right now to prevent any issues with breathing."

That sentence seemed to amp up her distress. She choked back a sob, bottom lip quivering.

Only then did Dennis completely alter his approach, placing a hand on her shoulder. He lowered his voice, soft and comforting. His eyes, though topped with furrowed brows displaying his stress, were grounding. "What's your name?"

"Amy," she managed through quiet sobs, "Amy Miller."

"Okay, Amy," Dennis nodded. "Let's get you over to Teddy."

He cast one more nod at Flora before guiding the pale, weeping wife through the halls, all the while reassuring her and explaining things that she probably hardly knew about. Medical jargon.

"They're putting a breathing tube in his throat so that he stays stable. We've got him on fluids and we're working to get our burn unit down as soon as possible to help figure out our next steps, but..." Dennis' eyes softened, "all in all, I think he'll pull through, Miss Amy."

"You think?" Hope flashed in her eyes like heavenly light.

A feeble smile curled up on the boy's lips as he halted, just in front of the entryway to trauma 1. "I do. And I'm praying for him."

Amy wiped another tear from the flushed bones of her cheeks, a dimpled grin creeping onto her face. "Thank you. *Thank you."*

He whispered a word of caution to her regarding silence in the room so that her husband could rest, and she acknowledged. Ushering her past the door, she stifled the anguished mewls bubbling up in her throat — well enough, too, that only Robby looked up from the utensil he fidgeted with by the bed.

"This is Mrs. Miller," Dennis introduced, polite and soft.

"Is he in *pain?"* She blurted. "Is he..."

"He's heavily sedated, ma'am," Robby nodded, speaking in that *tone.*

That low, comforting tone that Dennis had known once. Had known intimately.

"Will I get to talk to him again?"

Clearly, and it showed on Dr. Robby's face, there wasn't a solid answer to that.

Amy choked back another sob, creeping over to the edge of the bed and looking down at her burned husband. The man she loved so deeply, laid bare as Death's hungering growls echoed from just above.

"We're hopeful," the attending opted for in place of a definitive *yes* or *no.* "He's stable right now, and we're waiting to hear from our burn unit."

Clenching his jaw, Dennis stepped out of the room, offering no glance at Dr. Robby. In the hallway, he leaned his back to the wall next to the trauma 1 door, palming his forehead and letting out a strained sigh.

Robby's clinic in Franklin prepared him well enough for this shift. Had he not been privileged enough to have such prior experience, he might be far worse off on his first shift at Presby.

"Looking for work?" Dr. Mohan's voice cut through the silence.

No, I'd like to sit and process my emotions for a moment, my old mentor and secret male lover works here and I'd like to quit, he wanted to say. "I..." is all that actually comes out.

Dennis looked back through the glass door of trauma 1, eyeing Robby before turning back to Mohan. "I was with a burn victim. Dr. Robby told me to step out."

Dr. Mohan snorted, "Step out, hm? What'd you do?"

"...I'm still figuring that out."

She offered a more genuinely confused expression now, cocking her head.

A brief, awkward silence fell between the two of them as Dennis worked up the courage to ask:

"Dr. Mohan, do you..." he began to trail off. "Do you recognize me?"

Now she really looked confused.

Samira Mohan squinted, eyes flitting away from Dennis for a moment, as if to search elsewhere in her mind for the answer to that question. "Should I?"

Dennis chuckled nervously. "I, uh... I think I helped treat you for a flu at the Robinavitch Health Center in Franklin. Back in '61."

"Huh," she looked genuinely fascinated, but clearly she didn't remember him. "Wait— you *worked* for Dr. Robby?"

"I did, yes," he nodded. "He didn't... mention me?"

"Well," she crossed her arms, "he didn't speak all that much at the clinic."

Dennis' brows furrowed.

Explaining herself, Dr. Mohan said, "I came in asking for work during med school since it was a short enough commute. Spent about a year and a half working for him before I left for residency."

"No kidding," he breathed.

She nodded with a grin. "Yeah. Once or twice he mentioned teaching someone he swore was a prodigy. But that's quite literally all he ever said about it— he was *always* a private person. Maybe even more than he is now. But my hunch is," she leaned closer to Dennis, speaking more discretely, "that's probably because he has less to be private about nowadays."

A man with nothing at all has nothing at all to hide, she probably meant.

"I see," Dennis swallowed. "No— I..." and then he chuckled fondly, "that wasn't me. He was teaching another person around that time. A *real* prodigy."

Dr. Mohan put her hands on her hips, looking around while Dennis' eyes remained fixed on the floor.

He mustered the courage to speak: "If it's not too odd to ask, how *did* you both end up here —"

"Dr. Langdon," Samira grinned, tugging the senior resident over by his bicep before he could walk any further past them. "Why don't you and Whitaker do a round of triage together?" She turned to Dennis and said, "Could give you some good insight on incoming patient assessment."

The two men shared a look. It was... mutually understood discomfort.

"I'm quite familiar with triage," Dennis chuckled.

With a huff, Langdon said, "Ditto."

Dr. Mohan smiled. "Good! Then it'll be all the more efficient with the both of you."

Doubling down, Langdon protested: "Plus, I've gotta update Mr. Herron's chart."

"Do that," Samira patted the man's back. "Then take Whitaker to triage."

"Sometimes when it's really busy, we'll help nurses call patients back and *thin the herd* out here, so to speak," Langdon taught, hands on his hips as he and Dennis eyed the crowded waiting room.

"I did a lot of this back at the clinic," Dennis nodded.

"Ah. The one you mentioned earlier? '62, was it?"

"Yeah."

The two of them stepped into the room, ears bombarded by whining complaints, groans, and shuffling from the ill.

"So you've been practicing medicine for a long time?"

"Well," Dennis chewed inside his lip, "only for as long as I've been at the clinic."

Langdon looked a little confused, but he didn't care to ask further, it seemed. He glanced at his clipboard, and called out a name:

"Elijah Dombrowski?"

A man, perhaps a little older than Robby, stood from his seat eagerly, rubbing his soothing palm into his chest as he said, "That's me."

Dennis and Dr. Langdon walked the man back into an exam room with nurse Jesse, all the while sympathetically explaining to the patient why he'd been sitting in the waiting room for hours.

"There's just been a pressure in my chest. Since this morning. It's like someone's fuckin', I dunno, sitting on me," he explained, laying as Dennis listened at bedside.

"Vitals are good," Dennis nodded at Langdon, who watched from across the room with crossed arms. "BP's a little high."

"Sir, do you do a lot of smoking?" Langdon asked, and the patient nodded shamelessly.

Dennis put his stethoscope to use quickly, pressing the butt-end into Elijah's chest gently and listening close. After a quick assessment, Dennis confidently stood upright and fired off his observations to Langdon, who nodded the whole while, impressed by the med student's skill.

"Good," Dr. Langdon nodded. "Let's get Mr. Dombrowski on oxygen, and push morphine *carefully.* Order an EKG."

They did so quickly, and minutes later, Langdon was reading the results of the EKG. Nodding with his lips curled downward, the senior resident walked over to bedside and explained, "Mr. Dombrowski, you're jumping the line today, bud. We're admitting you to CCU. They've got telemetry and they'll do a hell of a lot better keeping an eye on you than anyone down here will."

Fear washed into the patient's eyes. "What's that mean?"

Soothingly, Dennis spoke up: "We're sending you to our coronary care unit. They've got the technology and expertise to manage your symptoms and help assess if this might be a heart attack. If it *is,"* he assured confidently, "you're in the safest place you can be."

And so, they admitted him.

"Thinning the herd," Langdon nodded proudly, nudging Dennis' forearm as they sauntered back toward the waiting room. "You're a natural at this, Whitaker."

"Oh, not really. I just, y'know— the guy looked worried. I told him what I'd have wanted to hear."

"You've got the same kind of energy about you as Dr. Robby." Langdon stated it with good intention, but Dennis wished he hadn't heard that.

Because he taught me long before he knew anyone here, he wanted to say.

"Not sure what that means," he opted for instead, feigning ignorance.

"I forget you're new," Langdon chuckled. "So you don't know him yet. He's the best of the best down here in the ED."

"I bet."

"I've been working with him for about three years now. He taught me every good thing I know about working in an environment like this. In the *chaos."*

"...You two seem close."

Dennis shouldn't have allowed himself to say that. He shouldn't have cared.

Dr. Langdon mused, "Yeah, I guess we are. Well— as close as one can *be* with a homebody like him. It's more of a *'work-only'* kind of friendship, y'know?"

"He doesn't socialize much?"

"Hell no," Dr. Langdon nearly cackled. "No. Robby? No. He's about as closed off as a man can get. And that's saying something."

Don't I know it, Dennis wanted to respond. Instead, he said, "I get that impression."

"Everyone does. I think even Samira does."

"Dr. Mohan?"

"Yeah. I just mean, of all the people he'd be open with, I thought it'd be her. Y'know, for a while, a lot of us thought they were a *thing*. He referred her to Presby for senior residency in... I think... 1970?"

Dennis' brows knitted tightly like frazzled bowstrings. "Are they? A thing?"

Langdon slapped Dennis' shoulder with a teasing smirk. "No, *God* no." Then, he leaned closer, speaking more discretely: "I love the guy to death, but I'd feel awful for any woman cozying up to Robby."

At some point, they'd stopped walking. In the doorframe between the ED's main room and the waiting room, Langdon and Dennis dove - unnecessarily - into gossip about their chief attending. Dennis couldn't help it. Langdon was a yapper.

"Why's that?" The boy asked, almost... *defensively.*

Dr. Langdon shrugged. "He's just a troubled guy."

"Troubled?"

A look settled onto the senior resident's face. A look like he knew he shouldn't have said anything, but wanted to continue. He let out a long, dragged sigh, rubbing at the stubble on his chin while looking down at Dennis, who stood only a little taller than the man's clavicles.

"Listen," Dr, Langdon began.

Nothing good *ever* began that way.

"I'm a real big fan of Robby's. And again, I love the dude like family. But he's got the tell of a man who doesn't really care when God comes knocking. Know what I mean?"

"...I guess?" Dennis squinted.

"He's never been the happiest guy, don't get me wrong. But I feel like... as years've gone by, he gets worse and worse. More isolated. More... cranky? I dunno if that's the best way to put it, but—"

"—Don't beat around the bush, Frank," Princess walked up, forcing a violent flinch from Dennis. As she nudged the senior resident, she looked at Dennis and said, "Sorry."

"I'm not beating around the bush," Langdon defended half-heartedly.

Princess huffed, casting a dissatisfied look at Dennis. "He's protecting his *idol."*

"He's not my *idol—"*

"I'm just psychin' you!" She laughed, slapping Langdon's bicep twice. When she reeled herself back in, she looked back to Dennis, more serious, and said, "But Langdon really *is*

beating around the bush."

Dennis looked back and forth at the two of them. "What do you mean?"

Langdon, very clearly, wasn't keen on saying more.

Whispering her gossip, Princess spoke in the man's stead: "It's gotten so bad with Robby that even *Abbot's* about ready to jump on his case. That's what I heard."

"Who..." Dennis squinted. "Who's Abbot? And why?"

"Robby's reckless with himself, apparently. Even worse: he *pretends not to be.* One of our night shift attendings, Dr. Abbott, saw him riding in on his motorcycle for the morning shift from the rooftop a few weeks ago and hasn't... really let it go since."

As Princess spoke, Langdon began looking more and more uncomfortable. Clearly he wanted no part in the gossip, especially not about the attending he looked up to like God. Dennis would've once said the same thing, a long time ago. Now, though, all he wanted was to drink in every corner of Robby's life, convincing himself it was for any reason but the one that scared him the most:

Limerence.

"...What'd he see from the rooftop?" Dennis could not stop himself from asking.

"He wasn't wearing a helmet," Princess gossiped. "Then he walked in for his shift, helmet on his arm, trying to act all natural— like he wasn't being reckless. Nobody loved the idea of him getting into motorcycles anyway, just 'cause... well, y'know. But everyone thought he was at least being safe about it. Abbott was *unsettled."*

"This building's pretty tall, maybe he wasn't seeing the guy right," Langdon tried to diffuse the gossip, sighing. His discomfort had begun to bubble over. "Any physician knows better than to do that. *Robby* knows better."

"I dunno," Princess shrugged, pursing her lips. "That's just what I've heard."

Dennis and Dr. Langdon spent another hour back and forth thinning the herd in the waiting room. All the while, the boy processed and digested what few bits of the puzzle he'd acquired from his conversation with Princess. He could've prodded Langdon for more, but didn't. Couldn't bring himself to learn more about whatever dark spirits might or might not have been circling above Robby's head.

I shouldn't care, is what he continued to remind himself. Until the hour was up.

By the end of it, he and Langdon had hardly dented the crowd in the waiting room, despite having examined, admitted, and sent home almost a dozen patients total. Each one they'd pick out was replaced, mere minutes - and sometimes seconds - later, another new patient filling the empty seat and leaving Presby's doctors one step closer to graying hairs and wrinkled skin.

"Princess," Langdon called the nurse over, putting an arm on Dennis' shoulder. "I need to speak with you about a patient— Whitaker, head back to Flora and see where you're needed, alright?"

Dennis nodded timidly, "Will do."

"Hey," Langdon punched the boy's bicep playfully, "you did great out here. You're a fucking natural."

With a shy smile, Dennis accepted the compliment, nodding to Princess, who also smiled at him. He felt a little buzz in his heart; the joy of success couldn't be weighed down by his frustratingly persistent inability to keep Robby out of his head. He'd found a tempo that worked for him, and that meant something.

Dennis Whitaker was built to withstand the horror of the Presby ED.

As he sauntered back into the main hall, Dennis caught sight of Robby, who stood at the edge of the nurse station, scribbling something down. The boy picked up pace, hustling over, brows knitting, mind devolving once more. His moment of pride had melted away, replaced again by his frustration.

"Dr. Robby," he asked, more meekly than he'd have liked.

"What can I do for you, Whitaker?" The older man spoke without looking away from the paper he scribbled on, dark, sweet voice trying - and almost succeeding - to disarm Dennis.

"Can we talk for a second?"

"I don't have a second," he mumbled. "Neither do you," he added. But then he looked up from his paper, meeting the boy's eyes and saying, "What do you want to talk about?"

Dennis gulped.

"Why did you toss me out?"

Robby knew what he meant. But still, he played dumb: "I'm not sure what you..."

"Teddy. Why did you tell me to step out?"

"Sharp tone, Whitaker," Robby cocked his head.

Remembering that the man was his superior, he backed off very quickly, devolving into that weak little voice he hated so much: "...Sorry."

Robby did not relish seeing Dennis shrink like that. "You acted like you've never seen a burn patient before."

"We *rarely* ever had burn patients in Franklin—"

"—I expect more from you of all people. I taught you better than that," Robby lowered his voice, but it remained stern. "And you're gonna see a hell of a lot more cases like these before today's over. This isn't Franklin, Whitaker. This isn't a makeshift clinic where we can send tough cases off to the big hospital and bestow our '*hopes'* and our '*prayers'."*

Dennis gulped down the lump in his throat, willing his body not to shake.

"We *are* the big hospital now. We *are* their hopes and their prayers."

The boy nodded in understanding, eyes locked like chains onto Robby's own. Clearly, a glint of pain - or some such feeling - had flashed inside his pupils, because it visibly disarmed Robby almost as quickly as it washed through Dennis. The older man untensed his face and his eyes. His entire demeanor changed, and then:

He placed his warm, large hand on Dennis' shoulder.

That physical contact that had once served to ground him from even the most unbearable heights. That hand which he'd known so intimately for years— it finally reached him once again.

Limerence, Dennis cursed in his mind.

"Listen to me, Whitaker," Robby cooed, even lower than a whisper, but cutting through the noise of the hospital like a blade. "Teddy's odds aren't great. I don't want you to attach yourself to something like this first thing in the morning. I do *not* want the guilt to crash down on you if he..." *doesn't survive.*

Dennis sighed. In his softest whisper, he declared, "...You can't do that to me."

"I'm your attending. I certainly can."

"You can't do that to Teddy," the boy changed course, voice raising a little.

"What— you think you *alone* are the deciding factor whether he lives or not? You think you can facilitate miracles, kid?"

Realizing his audacity, Dennis backed down, shaking his head.

"You did your job. And everyone in there is doing theirs just as well. But sometimes... everything we can do just isn't enough. I've handled cases like these. They can go south really fucking fast. And I just..." he sighed, squeezing Dennis' shoulder protectively, "I don't want you near that yet."

The man's firm hand, for the first time in Dennis Whitaker's life, did not feel grounding. It felt patronizing.

"...You haven't changed much, huh," the boy looked up, defiantly, into his attending's eyes. "Coddling me like I'm made of glass."

Dennis pulled himself back, then turned and walked away before Robby could protest in any way. The older man stood there, perplexed, watching as his med student stormed down the hall, disappearing around a corner. He found himself unable to look away.

Limerence.

Two more patients and one pair of scrubs later, Dennis stepped out of the makeshift changing room, adjusting the ill-fitted, black clothes as he walked. He nearly bumped into Dr. McKay as he turned the corner, not looking where he was going.

"Excuse me," Dennis offered apologetically.

"Change of clothes?" McKay eyed him up and down, suppressing a grin.

Awkwardly, he nodded. "I... got peed on."

"Oh," she said, like that was a normal thing. "A *warm* welcome to The Pitt."

Dennis' nose wrinkled.

"I'm— that was a joke, sorry," McKay finally chuckled, guiding Dennis to walk down the hall with her.

"Oh," he huffed awkwardly, mustering a smile. "Of course."

"Inappropriate," she sighed. "Well, aside from the scrub change, how's Presby treating you so far?"

"Uhhh," he dragged.

"Oo," McKay grimaced, nodding like she just *knew.* "Rough day?"

"A little," he admitted. "But I've learned a lot. It's had ups and downs."

"Naturally. Say—" she turned while they walked, eyeing the boy, "why don't you help me clear Jared Dever?"

"The drunk guy?"

"Yeah! He's sobered up now. It'd give you a little break from the chaos. We could all use one from time to time."

From far across the hall, Dennis caught sight of Robby behind the doors of triage 1, consulting doctors on a case that Dennis deserved to sit in on. It stirred frustration in him, but he forced himself to let it go.

"...Sounds good to me," he responded. "Yeah."

And so Dennis Whitaker had his break from chaos. McKay stood in as he examined Jared Dever, who'd become far more cooperative than he was in the morning. Dennis enjoyed it, even— chatting casually with the man, whose life had led him to this point. A point where drinks became the cure to all issues.

For Dennis, it was a means of showcasing - to himself, privately - what he could not afford to become. But sympathy still allowed his heart to ache as he listened to Mr. Dever's story. Listened to all the ways in which the man had ruined his life, his relationships, by giving in to the urges which itched at those who suffered arduous lives.

Dennis Whitaker was one such man.

Up to this point, the only urge which itched at him was *work.* But even work was simply a means to prove to himself - and to the ghost of the man he once loved - that he was useful for something.

Worth was everything, by this point.

If Thane, his very own father, could not find worth in him, and if Franklin, Tennessee could not find worth in him, then Dennis Whitaker would find worth in himself. Through ten years of unrelenting work in the wake of his father's death and during the most uncertain times of his life, Dennis succumbed to his own urges. Sure, it wasn't drinking— he was not Jared Dever in shared addiction. But he *was* Jared Dever in conscious self-destruction.

That made it all the more beautiful, understanding the man, even if only in pain.

"I think you've got something special, Whitaker," McKay praised tenderly, standing next to him as they watched Mr. Dever walk off toward the hospital exit.

"Hm?"

"You have a kind of... empathy," she smiled, "seems like it touched Mr. Dever. Empathy makes for a good doctor."

"I'm not so sure it was empathy," he shook his head. "Just... a bit of understanding through similar experience."

McKay faced Dennis. "You were a drinker?"

"No— no. God, no," he chuckled, waving his hands defensively. "I just meant— I've been where he's been. In pain. Unsure where he was headed."

"Well," she searched for the words, "you've both still got your whole lives ahead of you."

"Don't you?" Dennis raised an eyebrow as they meandered back toward the main hall.

"Ugh. I'm almost 43. The only life ahead of me now is my son." She added quickly: "Which I'm perfectly happy with. But, I get what you meant. About... being so uncertain."

Dennis eyed her, expecting an explanation.

"I, uh..." she began, tentatively, rubbing her palms together stiffly, "I was an addict. In my late twenties. It didn't help that my ex-husband was a prick. *Total* prick. But I lost custody of my son in the middle of all of it. Now I fight every day for him. Saving lives is important, of course, but part of this drive..." she tapped her chest, gesturing at her heart.

McKay recited, "Part of it's to prove to myself I deserve his love."

"I'm sure you're a great mother," Dennis comforted.

"Oh, I'm a *damn* good mother," McKay snorted. "A damn good mother paying for a lot of poor choices."

As they rounded the corner walking toward the nurse station, their conversation became stagnant as Dr. Robby's voice became clearer and clearer. Dennis watched as the attending stood, arms crossed in agitation as he spoke to an expensive-looking man next to him.

McKay and Dennis eavesdropped on the gradually heating conversation.

"—We need more funding if you want those results. How many times have I asked for your help voicing the importance of emergency medicine? And how many times have you shot me down?"

"It's too much of a risk, Michael. The investments in such a development are too high not to have some major plan together, and you're only one man. It's *pretentious*. I'm sorry."

"I'm not one man, I'm this whole ED. I'm every doctor and every nurse in here who works their ass off day and night to save lives using tools from a system that simply cannot keep up with the demands of the people. We need a better system. The times are evolving, and modern medicine isn't keeping up."

"I hear your concerns—"

"And it isn't fair that Presby has to be the big ol' test monkey for it all with no safety nets to ensure our patients get proper care. To ensure *we* stay safe. I know it's *'pretentious'* to expect immediate change, to— to expect you to wave a wand and create a system that suits us from thin air. But you're not even *trying,* Jeffery."

Jeffery's nose was raised high, chest puffed condescendingly. "Frankly, Michael, it's such an outlandish idea, anyway... this discussion, though better tabled, shouldn't ever be happening anyway. We're wasting time better spent discussing your department's metrics."

"...Metrics," Robby seethed.

Jefferey shrugged in his pantsuit. "At the end of the day, it's all about the money for my friends up top. You bump up your metrics, I'm more likely to take your concerns seriously. You let those metrics continue to *fall,"* he warned, "I'm more likely to replace you."

"If you want better metrics, hire more nurses. Invest in more beds, and more rooms. Train more staff to keep up with our constantly increasing intake of patients. And for God's sake, pay them a livable wage!"

"It's a budgeting thing, my friend," Jeffery spoke with agitating nonchalance.

"My ass," Robby growled. "My doctors pull your slack every day with what few scraps you give. Give us something to *work* with."

"I can only give what I get."

"Fucking hell!" Robby yelled, far louder than he meant to.

McKay turned back to Dennis, eyebrows raised high.

"Who is that?" Dennis whispered.

"Jeffery Lowe," McKay whispered back. "Presby's CMO."

"Oh..."

"Yeah," McKay nodded with a facetious smile. "This is an everyday thing between the two of them. They'll leave each other alone."

From trauma 1, where Teddy still lay, Trinity walked out, sauntering toward Dennis and McKay until she was close enough to butt into the conversation with a chuckle, "Is that the dude Dr. Robby's been screaming at?"

McKay hummed in confirmation.

"Heard from Princess and Perlah he was a troubled guy. Guess I see it, now."

"He's fighting for *us,"* Dennis defended softly, not turning to Trinity, eyes still boring holes in the side of Robby's head from across the hall.

"Ah," Trinity nodded indifferently. She then turned to McKay. "Got any fun cases I can help with?"

"No, but," she pointed at the chart on the desk, "we can find one, hm?"

Trinity wedged herself between Dennis and McKay. He watched as nurse Flora rolled over in her chair and set down another chart. "You've got your pick of the litter, ladies."

McKay rested her index finger on a name. "How about Mr. Luca O'Moore."

Trinity leaned in, reading the chart. "Multiple rib fractures, shortness of breath, pain in side, but vitals are stable with no signs of pneumothorax or internal bleeding— that's kinda boring, no?"

"I'm *so sorry,* Dr. Santos," McKay remarked sarcastically. "C'mon. Let's go."

Trinity groaned. McKay was already walking away, but Dr. Robby, finally having finished his confrontation with the CMO, walked over and leaned himself against the desk.

"Still moaning and groaning about saving lives, Dr. Santos?"

"No sir," she forced a smile at the chief attending, offering Dennis an annoyed glance and then strutting off behind McKay.

Robby turned to Dennis, crossing his arms and casually asking, "What's her bag?"

"She's a character," Dennis responded, like that alone was enough elaboration.

"You two've got the same address."

Robby knew he shouldn't have prodded about that. Then again, he knew a great *many* things he shouldn't do and still did.

"You're spying on me?" Dennis did not face the attending, but they leaned against the desk together, almost hip-to-hip.

"It was in your student file," he corrected softly.

"That why you weren't shocked to see me this morning?"

"I *was* shocked to see you."

"But you knew I was coming," Dennis surmised.

"Didn't make it any less shocking to see your face."

"Why, 'cause I got older?"

"Don't talk to me about old," Robby almost chuckled.

Betraying his attempt to remain guarded, Dennis quipped, "51 doesn't look *so* bad on you."

"Gee, thanks," the attending snorted.

Dennis might've continued loosening up, if not for Amy walking out of trauma 1 and shuffling over to the two of them. They watched as she did, and when she stopped just a foot in front of them, she wiped her eyes, clutching her purse as she spoke:

"Thank you... *so much.* For everything you're doing for my Teddy."

Professional mask securely on his face once more, Dr. Robby nodded. "Of course. And we'll continue doing everything we can."

She nodded with a grateful smile on her lips. "I need to go pick up our son. I can't afford to keep our nanny working any longer. Will, um..." she struggled to find the strength to ask, "will he be alright? While I'm gone? It'll only be thirty minutes."

Dr. Robby could not immediately find the right words, and that silence was a little daunting for Amy.

"The burn unit still hasn't arrived," he spoke honestly, and the fear in Amy's eyes began to return.

Before it could get any worse, Dennis chimed in: "But he's stable. He came to Presby in pretty bad shape, but the first step - *our* first step - is always to get the patient stable, and we were able to do that for Teddy."

He nodded as he spoke, and funny enough, it seemed to lure Amy to nod as well. Emotion connected the two of them, and she seemed to hear his emotionally charged response far more clearly than she heard Dr. Robby's honest and concerned response.

"Thank you," she whispered in a quiver, through the lump in her throat. "Are you from the city?"

The question was unexpected. Dennis blinked.

"Uh," he stammered, "no. I'm not."

A pitiful little smile crept onto Amy's pale face. "I could hear it in your voice. It's faint, but I can hear that twang." Before she made herself sound any more peculiar, she elaborated, "Teddy and I are from rural Pennsylvania. Even now, he still works on a farm, so we keep in touch with our roots."

"That's nice," Dennis smiled, fidgeting with his fingers over his stomach. "Yeah, my, uh... the *twang* used to be a lot more prevalent."

A fond grin betrayed Robby's lips.

"But I still think of home all the time."

"If you ever miss it," Amy spoke softly, "if you ever miss *home*... you should come visit us sometime. Teddy's a great cook."

There was a kind of sincerity in her voice that tugged not only at Dennis' heart, but even Robby's. As she said her goodbyes and walked away, the two of them stood in silence for a moment, hearing all of the unsaid words between them as they were bombarded with memories of Tennessee.

Of what was once their home.

"...You handled that very well," Robby praised, voice almost hoarse.

Dennis shrugged. "Yeah."

After another pause of contemplative silence, Robby decided to lean and whisper in a mumble: "I'm sorry."

Dennis turned to face the older man.

"I apologize for coddling you," he nodded. "You deserved to be in that room helping save Teddy's life."

"...Thank you," the boy offered tentatively.

"Why don't we, uh... go give Teddy a follow-up? I'll have you watch how I do it. Could be good for experience."

Dennis swallowed, trying to suppress the smile on his face as he mumbled, "I'd like that."

"Have you got something to write on?"

Dennis fished his little notepad and pen from the pocket of his ill-fitted scrubs, waving it for Robby to see.

"Alright. Let's go."

So, they walked back into trauma 1 where Teddy rested. Having been apologized to and invited back in, a kind of warm light shone on Dennis' chest like it was a new day. Suddenly the stress of it all didn't matter as much, especially not with Robby at the helm of the decision. Michael Robinavitch, his own source of sorrow for ten years, had just given him a little bit of hope.

How strange.

"We're going to observe Teddy, is all this really is," Dr. Robby taught. "He's stable now, of course. But a burn patient can change very, *very* fast."

That little hope morphed quickly into a swell of anxious buzz. *"Will* it... change?" Dennis asked nervously. "I just told Amy—"

Immediately sensing his nerves, Robby interrupted, "If it does, you need to focus. You're watching for his breathing and alertness. The silent danger with these kinds of patients is swelling in the airway— it can *always* turn bad fast if you're not monitoring, and we're in real shit because our burn unit's already tied down to hell. We're all this guy's got until they can take him."

Dennis nodded, trying to force down the nerves.

When they checked him, Teddy was fine. Oxygen saturation was normal, as well as pulse and respiratory rate. Robby had Dennis jot down a bunch of notes about monitoring and what to do in cases like these, where specialist departments were too tied down to be of use for prolonged periods.

But *just* as they left the room, Teddy's nurse barreled back out, telling Dr. Robby he needed to return.

"Patient's in respiratory distress," Robby assessed as Dennis observed in fear. "Whitaker, I need you over here *now."*

Dennis obeyed, walking up to bedside opposite Robby and awaiting further instruction.

"He needs an escharotomy," the attending nodded, looking up at Dennis, who clearly dreaded that term.

"Oh God," he whined. "I can't— I've never done one!"

"That's what I'm here for, kid," Robby reminded sternly. "The ventilator is struggling to get him air because of all of these full-thickness burns. You need to cut at the burned skin and release his chest."

"Dr. Robby, I—"

"Whitaker, if I didn't think you could do it, you wouldn't be here right now."

Dennis swallowed the impossibly hard lump in his throat, teeth bared as he nodded.

Robby grabbed a sterile scalpel, walking it over to Dennis carefully and guiding the boy's hands as they prepared the incisions. His own large hand covered Dennis', and he hovered behind while watching intensely at each motion of the blade. The fried skin very visibly released pressure with each inch severed, and once they'd finally connected both lines on the sides with a final horizontal line over the chest itself, Dennis stepped back, letting go of the breath he'd been holding in his lungs.

The nurse looked at Robby, nodding as she called out "Stabilizing," and he patted Dennis on the back.

"Look at you," he whispered, trying to calm the boy. "Look at *you."*

"Is he going to be alright? Did I—"

"You did fantastic, Whitaker."

They stayed in the room for several minutes. The nurse was in and out, but since the burn unit still hadn't arrived, and since Dennis had now inextricably tied himself to the case, Robby felt unable to leave until he knew Teddy would be handed off safely. It was fascinating to him, how quickly that mindset had stuck to him. Caring for the patient as though the patient were Dennis.

In a way, he *was.*

"You did very good," Dr. Robby praised again idly as he checked the machines and examined Teddy with his eyes. "This is just a waiting game now, until that *fucking* burn specialist shows up."

"Is this normal?" Dennis asked, a bead of sweat hanging at his brow.

"The waiting? Unfortunately. The ED is always the first point of contact for a patient, but even the specialized departments get full quickly. Teddy's just been a bit unlucky today. Just..." Robby began trailing off as something caught his eye, "a bit..."

The blood pressure machine was showing a sudden and dramatic drop.

Dennis' heart began to race again, brows knitting together as he watched Dr. Robby scurry frantically from the BP machine to Teddy's bed, stethoscope pressed above the heart. A look settled onto his face, like he knew what was coming. A look of dread.

Robby knew if Teddy died in here, especially *now,* Dennis would've carried all of that blame himself.

"Attempting resuscitation," Robby called out, immediately beginning chest compressions.

"But— he was *fine.* I thought I..." Dennis walked over frantically.

"I don't know, Whitaker," Robby admitted while pushing up and down. "Your cuts were fine. It's something internal we missed."

"Won't he die with that kind of force?" Dennis blurted, watching as Robby pushed intensely on the man's chest with each pump.

"He's dying regardless," the man gritted through clenched teeth, struggling to effectively perform CPR over the burned, inflexible skin of Teddy's chest. "Get some extra hands in here. Now!"

Frantic, as though Teddy were his own blood, Dennis tripped over to the door, peeking his head out and yelling, "We need an extra set of hands in trauma one! *Now!"*

Dr. Mel and Dr. Langdon rushed over together, barreling into the room with Princess following just behind, trying to assist resuscitation efforts in every way possible. Each of Robby's compressions further stressed the incisions Dennis had made on Teddy's chest.

Each push felt like hammering one more nail into the man's coffin.

Perhaps Robby was doing it on purpose—perhaps he was doing it to shoulder the burden of the loss, taking it from Dennis.

In any case, he needed to do it. Even on a patient as burned and weakened as Teddy, because, "Weak cardiac output is better than none," Dr. Langdon recited as they watched.

Minutes went by. Everyone in the room scurried and obeyed each order directed by Dr. Robby as he continued compressions, but it was all to no avail. After pushing the limits of what was allowed for a patient, Robby finally gave in, stepping away and watching as Dr. Mel checked for a pulse. When she stood upright again, shaking her head at Robby, the man's face fell, skin going pale with guilt. Dennis simply watched in horror, imagining what Amy was going to say when she returned to find that her husband had—

"Time of death..." Robby panted, jaw clenched. "15:24."

Dennis decided it was the second worst day of his life.

As he vomited, his head hung low in the toilet bowl, knees pressed uncomfortably into the hard bathroom floor as his wretches echoed. He clutched at the sides of the toilet with white knuckles, mumbling with wetted lips.

"Please forgive me, God," he tried. "Please forgive me, God," he tried again, and again.

Over and over.

He only stopped when he heard the bathroom door open outside the stall. No longer alone to beg for forgiveness for - in his mind - being at fault for Teddy's death, Dennis just sat there. Knees on the ground, head lurched in the toilet bowl, trembling in silence. He only dragged himself to his feet because whoever had entered the bathroom was making no noise; it made him think they might be watching him, or perhaps wondering if he'd died on the toilet.

No more humiliation necessary, he decided, wiping his lips and flushing the toilet.

Dennis unlatched the lock to the stall and swung the door open. Robby, who leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, looked up from the ground, worry in his eyes.

"I'm alright," Dennis spoke first, before the older man could even ask.

The look in Robby's eyes made it clear he didn't believe him. Dennis walked past Robby and toward the sink, turning on the water and letting the noise drown out the quiet shuddering gasps in his throat.

"Dennis."

Michael Robinavitch's voice was supernaturally disarming.

Hearing his name in that dark, sweet, comforting tone loosened every emotion hiding behind the dam in his eyes. Turning the sink off, Dennis leaned into it, choked sob echoing through the small bathroom.

"I killed him," he gasped for air.

"You did no such thing."

Robby was already behind the med student, turning him around so his back was pressed into the sink, face burying in Robby's chest. He wrapped his arms around Dennis, feeling the tug on his scrubs as the younger man clung desperately, breathing heavy into the fabric. They stood like that for a minute. Robby rubbed wherever he could feel, trying to calm Dennis' beating heart which he could almost *feel* against his own chest.

"Shhh," Robby reached an arm up, scratching the back of Dennis' head soothingly and rocking him.

"He died because I..."

"He died in cardiac arrest," Robby corrected softly, pressing his warm fingers into Dennis' scalp. "You kept him *alive.* You did everything you could."

"He went into cardiac arrest *because* of me!" Dennis pushed away, brushing past Robby, who stumbled back a little. "I did it wrong—"

"Cardiac arrest wouldn't relate to the escharotomy and you know it, Whitaker. We missed something in the initial exam. Something internal. He was bound to die long before you got in there. It had," he stressed the last few words with a pointed finger, *"nothing* to do with you."

Dennis stopped at the door, hand on the knob.

"Don't let this turn you into a pillar of salt," Robby implored.

The boy looked back, but he didn't respond. Only looked at Robby, into his eyes. The older man did not move, mindful of Dennis' bubble. He didn't want him to feel trapped.

"I'm *alright,"* Dennis assured less convincingly this time.

After taking another moment to fully compose himself, he swung open the door to the bathroom and stepped out, nearly bumping into Trinity Santos.

"Woah," she huffed, but froze when she looked up and saw Robby standing awkwardly in the bathroom. The bathroom that Dennis just walked out of.

"Sorry," Dennis mumbled, equally stunned. "Can we— can we walk?"

"You two all good in there?" She joked with a cocked eyebrow.

A warm flush buzzed the tips of Dennis' ears. He glanced behind him at Robby just as the bathroom door finished gliding closed, then looked back at Trinity. The look on her face nearly made his own burn beet red.

"What?" He stammered. "Are you insane?"

"I'm *kidding,"* she laughed as they began walking down the hall toward the nurse station. "That would be *really* unethical." Then she pursed her lips and frowned. "Then again, I guess I can't say much; that Dr. Garcia lady's been eyeing me up and down all afternoon like she wants me for breakfast." She nudged Dennis. "Even let me do a fasciotomy."

Dennis nearly tripped hearing that, noting her flirtatious tone.

"You *are* insane."

"Oh please. My secret couldn't be any safer than with another queer."

"I'm not a queer," he reminded her—for the thousandth time that day, it seemed.

In a particularly playful mood, Trinity hummed, "Then I don't feel so safe with you staying another night in my apartment."

Dennis offered a defeated look, eye twitching as they continued walking. "I'm just..." he struggled, *"...open-minded."*

"An open-minded homosexual?"

Dennis grumbled, "Y'know what? Whatever helps you sleep."

"Transparency helps me sleep, Huckleberry," she beamed as the boy picked up pace, leaving her behind.

Standing still for a moment, Trinity wondered if, perhaps, she'd gone a little far that time. She knew pretty well that Dennis wasn't confiding in her, and it shouldn't have agitated her, but in a way, it did. She gave him a roof over his head. In her mind, it made sense that he should be able to trust her enough to share a secret that she'd shared with—

"—What you got there, kid?" Flora snuck up behind Trinity, gesturing at the paper in her hands as she whipped her head around to face the woman.

"Wha- oh." Trinity chuckled, waving the paper. "Just a prescription form. It's for one of my patients. Actually, I was looking for you. I, uh..." she contemplated asking something.

Flora raised an eyebrow.

Trinity licked her lips and cocked her head, "Do you happen to have a log of which prescriptions in our inventory are signed out? And... by who?"

"Of course I do. *Why?"*

"I just wanted to check on an irregularity with one of my patients. He visited earlier this morning. Got a full prescription, but came back hours later with only half the pills."

Amy returned to the hospital - with her little son trotting by her side - only five minutes later than she'd promised. Dennis nearly bumped into her on his way to the nurse station. His inability to keep himself composed was, pretty immediately, very alarming to Amy.

It was clear that something had happened to Teddy.

Dennis didn't need to say anything, but he did anyway. Through shaky breaths and a meek, trembling voice, he explained that Teddy had died mere minutes ago. Amy sobbed and her knees slammed onto the bright hospital floor as she clutched at her little boy.

"You said he was stable!" She wailed, which especially gutted Dennis.

Because he *did* say that. And perhaps he shouldn't have.

He didn't have it in him to tell her the details after that. Couldn't bring himself to verbalize his concern that he was to blame for the man's death, regardless of what Robby believed. And Dennis knew Robby was probably right—Teddy's death probably had very little to do with him given the circumstances.

But the guilt fell heavy upon his chest anyway.

Amy spent a solid minute in guttural anguish on the floor as Dennis awkwardly tried calming her—and *himself*. Eventually, Dr. Mohan rushed over, helping to calm Teddy's grieving wife and unsettled toddler. She was good at handling the little boy, but only because she'd already gone through the pain of losing her own father early in life. She knew what kind of shock he was in. Knew how to navigate that maze.

When they calmed Amy down enough, Mel came over and offered to take her son to the cafeteria. Dennis and Samira walked her into trauma one to view her husband, who'd now been covered with a plain, white sheet.

A choked sob escaped Amy's throat when her eyes landed upon her covered husband.

"This isn't real," she whined. "He was just fine this morning before work. We kissed and said *I love you* and— and..." she trailed off, gasping for air.

Samira rubbed her back while Dennis walked over to the edge of the bed, haunted by the body that he'd failed to keep alive. He pinched the edge of the sheet, peeling it down only just enough to uncover Teddy's face, leaving everything else unseen. It was better that way.

Seeing her husband's face only drew more cries from Amy. It only served to further stir the raging pot of anguish in her chest, and it killed Dennis to see that.

"Excuse me," he apologized, covering his mouth and sprinting past Dr. Mohan, leaving the room before she could say anything.

Once again, Dennis found himself in the bathroom on his knees. This time he dry-heaved into the toilet bowl. His body gave its involuntary reactions, but he forced himself - with a deep, crunching bite into his cheek - to hold back the tears. There would be no more tears. He could not allow himself to give into such emotions this far into his career. Not after everything he'd accomplished.

This time, Robby was not waiting to comfort him outside the stall.

This time, Dennis wished he was.

The evening hours of Dennis Whitaker's shift did not have any mercy on him. Not because of the shift itself, but because of the guilt which sat against his snapping ribs, forcing the air from his lungs. Forcing the life from his already tired, baggy eyes. Forcing the color from his pale, pasty skin and his chapped lips.

As much as he hated to admit it, too, he might've just walked out and never looked back, had it not been for Samira Mohan.

"Mr. Whitaker," she spoke softly as they exited a patient's room. "You've been awfully quiet the last three hours."

Dennis looked up at her as they walked. "I think I've been fairly quiet since this morning, no?"

"Quieter than *normal."*

Robby walked past them with Mel at his side. He and Dennis exchanged a glance. Samira and Dennis kept walking the opposite way.

"I've just been processing a lot of things today."

Samira nudged him. "This *is* a big step up from the clinic."

Oh, right. She would know, he reminded himself.

"Bigger than I hoped it would be, I think." Dennis stopped walking, then so did Dr. Mohan. With a kind of vulnerability in his eyes, he looked up and asked, "Does it ever get easier?"

Samira cocked an eyebrow.

"Losing a patient," Dennis clarified.

"Ah," she nodded once. "It... well, no."

The boy sat in that response for a moment, wishing it'd been a *different* answer.

"But I don't know that it's supposed to."

Dennis looked up at the woman.

Samira continued: "What we do is difficult work, not just based on our own abilities, but also by virtue of our humanity. The majority of us are doctors because we care about saving lives. Of course it'll hurt when we fail to do so. But if you're a doctor - especially in a place as crazy as The Pitt - you're *going* to fail sometimes."

"I'm afraid of that," Dennis nodded, like he was coming to that realization for the first time. "I wanted Teddy to make it. Not just for my sake... for hers. And if I couldn't save him, then *why—"*

"—Mr. Whitaker, we don't take patients with a certainty that we'll save them. We take them because they *need* us."

Dennis opened his mouth, but words did not come out.

"I'll make the assumption you're not a doctor because you expected to save every single life you came across for the next forty or fifty years. And it isn't *supposed* to be easy when it happens. You're human, and humanness is a blade without a handle. It cuts you while you carve your path."

"Can I drop the blade?" Dennis chuckled, but there was no humor in it.

Samira crossed her arms. "Then how will you carve forward?"

They paused for a moment.

Before Dennis could respond any more, lest he continue combating his willingness to help in the hospital, Dr. Mohan cleared her throat and guided him two steps forward to the patient board.

"Let's pick up a patient together."

And so, Dennis tentatively agreed.

But Samira seemed, unfortunately, to have given him no choice but to settle for a simple case. A lower risk patient who certainly wouldn't leave Dennis with any more scars to bring home that night. The decision felt almost patronizing, but he did not protest. They walked into the room together, chart in Dennis' hand as he introduced himself and Dr. Mohan.

"Mr. Jean Torres, severe hand injury from work equipment. Bleeding controlled in triage. Patient is awake, of course. Any other injuries we aren't aware of, Mr. Torres?"

"No," the oddly familiar man shook his head politely.

Dennis tried his best not to stare, but he couldn't shake the familiarity.

"Any, uh..." he trailed, "dizziness or fainting?"

"No, sir."

"Time since injury?"

"About two hours. We were moving boxes for inventory. At my job."

Samira stood back, watching with a smile on her face as Dennis took over the case like a natural, almost unenthusiastically—like he'd done this a million times today.

"Tetanus status?"

"I've got my shots," Jean nodded.

Dennis spent a second confirming other information. When that was done, he walked over and removed the dressing to find that the skin integrity was good. There was no obvious tendon laceration, no exposed bone, no vascular compromise, no severe crush or avulsion, *and:*

"No gross contamination that we can't irrigate right here," he nodded, looking back at Samira, who approved with a smile. "We should prepare lidocaine."

"I agree."

"Lidocaine?" Jean asked softly.

Dennis turned to the man. "Local anesthetic. We'll numb your hand so irrigation isn't uncomfortable."

"Oh, rad."

After preparing the lidocaine, Dr. Mohan handed it off to Dennis, who injected it swiftly and carefully, waiting a moment for the numbing to set in.

"You're a student doctor?" Jean asked, eyes fixated on the badge hanging from the waistband of Dennis' scrub pants.

Dr. Mohan prepared the tray and tools for irrigation, setting them where Dennis could reach from his seat at bedside.

"I am."

"Coulda fooled me. You're very good at this. I don't usually feel too comfortable with doctors."

From the corner of the room, Samira smiled.

Dennis disregarded the compliment, as though he did not hear it, instead explaining, "I'll need to spend some time irrigating your hand with saline to get out any potential dirt. Prevents infection and whatnot."

"I get the idea," Jean nodded, eyes locked to Dennis'.

"Whitaker," Samira called out. "I've gotta step out for a second. You got this?"

He nodded, jaw clenched.

When they were alone in the room, Jean just watched as Dennis focused. He had a frown in his brows, and he bit his lip, squinting down at the damaged skin as he carefully flushed it.

Breaking the silence, Jean cleared his throat and asked, "You live in Oakland?"

That stopped Dennis' tempo. He looked up, relatively unassumingly, and said with a tentative voice, "Uh... yeah. Sorta. How'd you guess?"

"We danced together at The Gem last night." He watched as the med student's face pointedly did *not* change. "Or do you not remember?"

Dennis swallowed, but he still did not react.

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about."

There was a kind of icy professionalism in his voice that stifled their conversation while he finished irrigating. Neither man spoke again until Dennis had finished his work, re-dressing Jean's hand and standing from his seat at bedside.

Jean chuckled—innocently. "I'm not gonna tell anyone anyway. I'd be damning myself, *too,* y'know."

"There's nothing to tell."

Dennis walked over to the wall phone and dialed, speaking with an orthopedic consult about Jean's situation. With a click, he stuck the phone back in its place on the wall and turned to the patient's bed.

"I just need to check with Dr. Mohan and then you'll be all set to discharge," he spoke quickly, like he was trying to escape the room.

He turned, striding for the door, and before he could push it open, Jean said, "...Well," and sighed. "You were beautiful out there. When you didn't care what others thought."

Jean finished with: "Anyone would be lucky to see that side of you."

Dennis paused for a split second before walking out.

The nurse station was a little more crowded than usual. New faces in scrubs sauntered around like they owned the place. Of course, that made sense to Dennis—it *was* the end of the day shift. He'd heard that Presby's ED was a true twenty-four-hour experience, with a schedule that allowed rotating shifts to keep the department staffed and tended to at all times.

With Jean's patient chart in hand, Dennis walked toward Samira, who stood next to Robby and a rugged, silver-haired man in scrubs. The three of them seemed deep in conversation, but Robby had a knack for sensing Dennis when they were in the same room. He looked up, eyes locking onto the boy's, and he offered a quiet nod.

"Orthopedics cleared Mr. Torres," Dennis informed as he wedged himself between Dr. Mohan and Dr. Robby. "Just needs your approval for discharge."

"Let me get to that. Then I'm out of here for the rest of the weekend!" Samira joked as she stepped back.

"Better not forget drinks with the group tomorrow night," the silver-haired man pointed at Samira. "It'd crush me!"

"Oh shut it! I already said I'd go," she swatted dismissively, chuckling as she disappeared into the patient room.

"Whitaker, this is Dr. Jack Abbot," Robby introduced awkwardly.

"Pleasure," the man said sardonically as he took Dennis' hand and shook it firmly. "What brings you to this *lovely* department?"

"He's one of my new med students," Robby spoke for him.

"Oh, are you the one that passed out this morning?" Abbot asked insensitively, then looked at Robby, "Samira said a newbie passed out this morning."

"Javadi," Robby corrected.

"Ah," Abbot nodded. "Well, you made it through this shitshow in one piece. That's a feat, kid."

"*'In one piece'* is a stretch," Dennis chuckled, but he meant it. "But... I'm still here. I think."

"What doesn't kill you..." Abbot winked.

Dr. Abbot was a very jaded man with a funky sense of humor, but he had a heart. Dennis, of course, wouldn't know that, though. At least not tonight. And he probably didn't want it explained to him, either, after everything he'd been through. So, Robby patted a hand on Abbot's shoulder, leaned in, and lightly redirected the man:

"I'm gonna borrow Whitaker for a second. You mind checking with Samira for handover?"

"I mean," Abbot snorted, *"I* don't. But she probably wants to go home."

"She's tough. And you two get on well."

Abbot spared one last glance at Dennis and joked while pointing at Robby: "This guy'll try to scare you out of the ED. Don't let 'im."

As the silver-haired man walked off, Robby and Dennis found one another's eyes quickly. They searched for a moment, finding pain. Trying to find common ground. Dennis was clearly still haunted by Teddy Miller, but he'd certainly mellowed out a little.

"How're you holding up?"

Dennis sighed, "Dr. Mohan thinks I'm frail."

"What makes you say that?" Robby crossed his arms.

"She gave me a whole lecture about the importance of saving lives, then had me pick up... the *easiest* case I've taken all day."

The older man shrugged. "So she's trying to ease you into things again."

"I don't need that."

"Is there something wrong with needing that?"

"No, but I *don't* need it."

"Whitaker."

Dennis looked up. He hadn't really noticed his eyes had fallen to the floor.

Robby said, "You lost your first patient today." He shook his head as he explained in his low, gravelly voice, "That's never easy. And every other doctor who's been here more than a minute knows it."

"But I'm your..."

A foreign feeling bubbled in Dennis' throat. It was like a monstrous combination of guilt, frustration, and egotism. The weight of importance crushed him, like it was his duty to be the best while under Robby's watchful eye. Like he was not allowed to make a mistake, which he'd done all throughout the day.

"My what?"

Dennis shook his head, swallowing the lump in his throat.

I'm your protege? Your mentee? Your best man? Your strongest soldier? Your most devout acolyte? Your brightest angel? Dennis Whitaker knew that after ten years, he was absolutely none of these things to Michael Robinavitch. But, once more under the taller man's gaze, he felt the weight of every one of these things.

It crushed him slowly.

"I—"

Before Dennis could start his sentence, two EMTs barged through the doors of the ambulance bay, wheeling in a man who looked like he'd been mauled.

"William Harris. Thrown from his motorcycle in an accident. Complained of sharp chest pain in the left side before losing consciousness. Tachycardia and hypotension with a slight dyspnea. Bruising on the left side of the chest near the ribs," the male EMT fired off as Dennis and Robby hurried over.

Princess and Perlah were quick to swarm around, then Trinity and Dr. Langdon ran up just after. They wheeled the patient into trauma 1 swiftly, setting him up and establishing IV access.

"Blood pressure is trending down," Perlah called out from the machine.

Dr. Robby rushed to the foot of the bed while Dr. Langdon and Dr. Santos took the left side. Perlah and Princess hustled around on the right side to manage vitals while Dennis positioned himself nearly hip-to-hip with Robby.

His heart *pounded.* Perhaps because he was in such close proximity to Robby. Or perhaps because he was now standing in the same room where he'd, mere hours earlier, lost a patient he all but swore would live.

"Heart rate is 120, BP is 90/60 and dropping. Dyspnea," Princess confirmed, nodding at Robby, who studied the patient intensely.

With all the anxiety buzzing at his throat, Dennis licked his lips and mumbled, "Pneumothorax."

Robby ignored him.

Langdon quickly cut Will's shirt, peeling it open to reveal the bruising at his chest. "Bruising over the left ribs, but no apparent chest wall instability. He's got," he listened with his stethoscope, "diminished breath sounds on the left, and no dramatic tracheal deviation."

Dennis' ears rang. He wanted to believe it was a simpler situation than it was. He found himself *wishing* this stranger's ailment wasn't like Teddy's. An undetectable, unpredictable phantom. A kiss from Death itself, pressed upon the insides of the very man Dennis was tasked to save.

So again, Dennis almost deliriously muttered to Robby, "It could be pneumo."

This time, the attending acknowledged him: "Possible. Keep examining."

Robby uncrossed his arms, moving to the head of Will's bed and examining the neck. After a moment of squinting, he noted: "Neck veins are full."

Princess looked up from the machine in front of her and paused.

Dennis frowned. "Trauma. Shortness of breath. Pneumothorax would *easily* explain hypotension."

"So would tamponade," Robby cast a sharp look at Dennis, who, surprisingly, returned the look in kind.

The whole room could feel that tension. Trinity cocked her head, eyes darting between the two of them as she pieced together whatever was going on in front of her.

"Tone down the attitude, Whitaker," Langdon chimed in pungently, looking surprised. "Listen to your attending."

Dennis looked at Langdon, then back at Robby, who said nothing. The boy's heart *pounded.* Was he really deep in his own head? Or was he, as others had been telling him all day, actually good at this job? Did he know for certain the patient in front of him was suffering a collapsed lung, or could it really have been something far more serious? Something he did not want to confront again just before his shift ended?

Was he *scared* to confront the idea of losing another patient?

Seeing the frustration and the fear behind his boy's eyes, Robby sighed, planting his stethoscope down on Will's chest just above his heart and handing the other end to Dennis, saying, "Listen, Whitaker. Do you hear how quiet that is?"

Dennis frowned, trying desperately to explain why the sounds of Will Harris' heart were so faint.

"It—" he stuttered, "it could be Mr. Harris's body habitus. Or noise—"

"—Christ, *look at him.* He's thin," Robby snapped in aggravation, patience waning. "You need to observe with your *eyes,* Whitaker, not your imagination."

Dennis retracted, like being bitten by a dog.

Louder for the room to hear, but staring holes into Dennis, Robby lectured: "Tension pneumothorax gives you air hunger and it spirals very fast. It gives you a collapsing chest and veins that flatten. Mr. Harris here does not have that. His veins are up, his chest isn't hyper-resonant. His breath sounds are reduced, yes, but *not* gone altogether."

Trinity, to her own utter shock, couldn't focus on the exciting prospect of a tamponade patient, because the tension between Dennis and Robby was *far* more intriguing to her.

Breaking the brief silence, Dr. Langdon spoke up: "Something's stopping his heart from filling."

Robby nodded. *"Thank you, Dr. Langdon."*

Trying to reel himself in, Dennis blurted: "Blood?"

"Pressure," Robby half-agreed. He then turned to Langdon, and after a pause of contemplation, said, "Prepare for pericardial decompression."

The whole room froze.

The panic in Dennis' eyes flashed bright enough to blind Robby right there. He'd only just lost Teddy Miller mere hours ago for having tried a risky procedure, and now here he was again, in the same room, watching another patient prepare to undergo a procedure that could go *quite* wrong.

"Pericardial..." he breathed, shaking his head.

Robby was already in motion, directing Langdon and Santos.

One last time, defensively, Dennis blurted, "Dr. Robby! Should— should we not decompress the chest first?"

Robby barked back, "Whitaker. If I'm incorrect, we lose a few minutes. If *you're* incorrect? We lose Mr. Harris."

Dennis blinked.

He watched in slow-motion as Langdon and Trinity helped prepare the procedure. He just stood and watched, feeling the weight of expectation finally snap his ribs with a crunch. For all the years of work he'd put into this job, he seemed no better than the boy he was at the clinic in Franklin. He seemed no stronger, no smarter, no more capable.

Dennis watched just as closely as everyone else as Robby inserted the needle, finding resistance. Mere seconds later, there was a distinct release, and dark blood filled the syringe. Will, though unconscious, exhaled deeply.

Dr. Langdon whipped his head over to the machine and grinned. "BP is climbing back up."

There it is, Dennis thought to himself.

His fall from grace. Well, his *final* fall. Had they listened to him, Will Harris would have been dead in minutes thanks to the pressure around his heart. All because Dennis Whitaker was too afraid of the idea that he'd have to involve himself in another risky procedure to save - or end - a man's life.

Samira Mohan may have been right to lecture him about the importance of saving lives. She may have been right to remind him that he did not take this job thinking it would not come with risks, but to save people. She may have been right to coddle him into a case as simple as Jean Torres, because he could not handle a tougher case. But if he could not handle a tougher case now, then - in his mind - perhaps he could never handle it. Any of it. Dennis had, in his own cowardice, nearly lost another patient.

Perhaps the blade with no handle was better at cutting his palm than it was at carving a path forward.

Dennis was no longer sure if that blade represented his medical career or the ghost of the man he once loved, who stood mere feet away from him, totally the same yet wholly unrecognizable.

Perhaps, he thought, *it's time to finally to let go.*

"Alright, I was kinda joking earlier, but," Trinity leaned closer to Dennis as they walked, "seriously, what the *fuck* is going on between you and Dr. Robby?"

They'd just finished their shift, only a few minutes after handing off Will Harris to the night shift, and even fewer minutes after Robby's closing speech to his day shift doctors. He'd huddled everyone around the nurse station and thanked them for their relentless work. For the most part, that speech seemed a bit recited. A bit tired.

"It doesn't matter," Dennis shook his head, moping. "He was right."

"No *shit* he was right," she huffed. "You sounded dumb in there— paranoid. But that back and forth with him? That was weird. *Really* weird. And come to think of it," Trinity squinted, "that's been going on like... *all day."*

Dennis shrugged. "I dunno what to tell you."

"Do you two know each other?"

"No," the boy assured defensively.

"You sure?"

Dennis met eyes with Trinity sternly. "I'm sure."

She stared back defiantly for a moment, then rolled her eyes when it became clear the boy wouldn't budge. "You're *such* a Huckleberry."

Trinity pulled the strap of her bag, tightening it on her shoulder as the warm night air of Pittsburgh hit their faces. Stepping back outside after a full twelve hours in the hospital was a euphoria that Dennis had never expected to know. The air was crisp, the breeze cool on his skin.

"...Y'know," she sighed. "I can tell it bothers you."

"What does?"

"Teddy Miller," she spoke carefully. "You really weren't the same after that happened."

Dennis only nodded.

Trinity looked over at him, stopping on the sidewalk at the front of the hospital. "I'm *saying* you're a good doctor." She admitted that like it pained her. "I think you just lost your footing a little."

The boy's lips curled downward, but he looked up at his roommate, *surprised* by the gentleness in her voice.

It was a fleeting moment, though. As soon as she seemed to notice how supportive she sounded, Trinity put her walls right back up, huffing and rolling her eyes and laughing it off as a joke.

But it did not feel like a joke to Dennis. Especially not coming from Trinity Santos. It *meant* something, and he couldn't really explain why.

"I'm grabbing groceries before I go home, so if you're coming, let's go," Trinity said, acting totally nonchalant about it.

That felt like her way of formally declaring she didn't mind Dennis crashing at her apartment for the time being. For how long, he did not know and would not ask. But if she didn't mind him, he wouldn't mind her. And perhaps he'd even learn to let 'Huckleberry' slide.

"I'll uh," he tried, "I'll head home first. I'm pretty beat."

She scanned his face, brows furrowing for a moment. Then she relaxed, nodding and swiveling on her heel to walk toward the center of the city.

"Alright, Huckleberry, but I'm not gonna guess what food you like—"

"Trinity?"

She stopped walking, but did not turn to face Dennis.

"Thanks," he offered, voice frail.

Trinity didn't verbally acknowledge him, but she did respond in the only way she knew how: a little nod of her head as she resumed her walk forward, never once looking back at the boy she'd saved.

Dennis watched her for a while as she walked further and further away, then looked around, hearing the wind in the trees, imagining home. Imagining Tennessee. Those soft whistles of cool night air in the fall—it was his favorite time to be outside in Franklin. This felt akin to that, perhaps only because he'd been crammed in a hospital with blood and urine and sweat and medical jargon bombarding him all day.

It was, without a doubt, the second worst day of Dennis Whitaker's life.

But he *survived* it.

"What doesn't kill you," he muttered to himself, reciting Jack Abbot's little hum.

Only then did he feel the dam of tears burst through his eyes. It was... a little odd. He could've sworn he wasn't feeling *that* emotional in the moment, but the tears poured out and fled down his cheeks anyway. Perhaps it was the residual weight of the day finally hitting him all at once, like an afterimage. Perhaps he'd gone insane. In any case, he let those tears fall. Allowed it—like a reward for enduring the pain of Presby.

He let the tears fall in utter silence, looking up at the trees, interrupting the peace only to occasionally mutter in a soft whisper, *"What doesn't kill you..."*

"Everything okay, Whitaker?"

Robby's voice called from behind, ripping the boy from his little moment. He wiped the tears from his face with the sleeve of his zip-up hoodie, sniffling as he turned around, acting as normal as possible.

"Yeah— yes. Of course. Hey." Dennis cleared his throat. "You're still here?"

Robby pointed behind him at the Presby building with his thumb. "Had to finish my end of handover."

"Right."

There was an awkward pause, but both men stood there on the sidewalk, illuminated only by a streetlamp.

"...This is so stupid," Dennis finally admitted in utter defeat.

"Hm?" Robby crossed his arms, adjusting his backpack as he cocked his head a little to the left and squinted.

"What are the odds," the boy shrugged, "after all this time?"

"It's certainly bizarre," Robby agreed. "I'm a little worried about you."

Dismissing the man's concern, Dennis continued, "I dunno if it's supposed to be some sick lesson but... of all places. Of all people. It's *you."*

"Whitaker," Robby demanded the boy's attention.

And the boy, with his eyes, obeyed.

Robby said, "Tell me you're alright, kid."

It should've been easy. After all, Dennis had been lying it through his teeth all day. *I'm alright,* he said more times than he could count. *I'm okay,* he assured to more faces than he could remember.

But there in the dark, wet-pearl eyes clinging to Robby's like they held him afloat, Dennis could not bring himself to lie. So instead, a tear betrayed his right cheek, streaming down all by itself as his chin quivered.

"I'm..." he tried, choking through the honesty: "I'm hurting a little, Dr. Robby."

"A little?"

Robby's voice was sweet and dark, cradling Dennis from across the sidewalk.

"I'm *useless,"* he redirected his pain into a kind of dull self-hatred. "I almost lost a second patient tonight. All because I'm a coward."

"You were afraid."

"Doctors shouldn't be afraid."

"A real doctor is *always* afraid, Whitaker." Robby corrected softly. "He just learns to trust himself."

Dennis peeled his eyes away from Robby, but couldn't bear it for more than a moment before returning them. His lip twitched. He wanted to respond, but he'd probably jump into oncoming traffic if he choked up in the middle of a sentence one more time. He'd truly had enough of that for one day.

So, wiping the last tear from his cheek and clearing his throat, Dennis nodded, stepping forward, just a little closer to Robby.

"...I don't know that I expected it to affect me this much today. I didn't expect *you* to affect me this much."

Robby hummed. "How so?"

"I think I overwhelmed myself. Trying to impress you. Trying to... *appease* you." Hearing himself say it nearly made the boy chuckle. "I don't know *why,* either. I haven't seen you in ten years. You're a stranger now. I shouldn't give a damn how I look in front of you. Shouldn't give a damn how you see me."

"But you do," Robby surmised.

Dennis bit inside his cheek. "...Maybe I do."

"Maybe you do," Robby whispered so quietly he wasn't even sure Dennis heard it.

"I guess..." Dennis began, not really knowing where he was going with the sentence. "...I guess I didn't expect it to affect me."

"This ED *is* a tough place—"

"I mean you," Dennis interrupted timidly, fidgeting with his fingers. "I didn't expect *you* to affect me this much. I was shocked to see you this morning, but I thought... it'd pass. Throughout the day. I wanted to believe I wasn't clinging to you all these years."

"Clinging to me?"

I've still got your books and I see you in every face, Dennis wanted to elaborate. But he did not say it aloud.

Instead, he shook his head, brushing off that side of the conversation. So, they stood there in another moment of silence, aided only by the occasional whistle of trees which lined the big streets around the front of the hospital.

Robby looked around, scratching the beard on his chin and tugging the strap of his backpack. His helmet was latched at the bottom, dangling uselessly.

"How are you getting home tonight?"

Dennis looked back at the older man. "By foot."

"Santos' place?"

"Yeah."

Robby's eyes darted to the ground, and he contemplated. Then he looked back up toward Dennis - not in his eyes, though - and mumbled, "You have any aversions to motorcycles?"

"...I've never been on one."

The older man nodded. Then he gestured for Dennis to follow him, and against the boy's better judgment, he did. He trailed awkwardly just a step or two behind the senior attending as they walked around to the side of the hospital where a black and silver motorcycle rested in its parking spot.

"I might as well just walk home. I'm not going to take your helmet," Dennis spoke as they walked, eyes fixed onto the helmet as it dangled off Robby's backpack. "If you don't have a spare."

Robby chuckled as they stopped just behind the motorcycle. "I don't mind," he admitted a little too nonchalantly. "It'd look better on you than it would me, anyway."

The boy's brows furrowed tight.

"God... they were *right."*

"What?" Robby cocked an eyebrow. "Who?"

"People around Presby. They said..." Dennis contemplated if it was a good idea to be honest about it. "You don't wear a helmet."

Robby could hardly stand to look at the sad smile on Dennis' face.

"Why, Dr. Robby?" He asked, voice soft and sincere. "What if... what if you ended up in an accident?"

"I'd be in good hands at Presby," the older man half-joked. "It'd give me an excuse to have you examine me."

"That's not funny," Dennis defended very seriously. "It's not a joke. You and I both saw firsthand tonight what can happen—" Dennis couldn't finish the sentence. Will Harris was still a sensitive, fresh subject for him.

The older man shrugged as he settled: "I wouldn't get in a wreck."

"What the hell's gotten into you?" *You were never this reckless in Franklin,* Dennis wanted to add.

Robby squirmed under the boy's gaze for a moment, struggling to answer. He slung his backpack off, resting it on the seat of his motorcycle as he took a deep breath in. He shook his head, rubbing his palms over the strained smile on his face.

"Can I be honest, Whitaker?"

"That would be a first for you," Dennis remarked sharply.

The older man tensed at that, but he nodded—accepted the remark. It was warranted after everything that'd happened in Franklin.

"The way I treated you," Robby blurted, voice tinged with a kind of grief. "The ways in which I... pushed you out and left you. On your own. It's killed me more times than a motorcycle ever could."

Dennis didn't expect *that* kind of honesty. At all.

Robby looked up, forcing himself to look the younger man in the eyes, nodding as he admitted, "It haunts me every day. It's *been* haunting me in evolving ways since the night you left."

A deer in headlights, Dennis stood utterly still, just watching as the older man's face contorted with different emotions. Anguish, regret, guilt. Like a flashing sign. Like he'd been holding it all in under his professional mask the whole day.

"I drove to your house that night," Robby admitted. "Drove there thinking I could fix it again. Like I always did. Fixing the problem with a bandage and moving forward. But you weren't there. You never came back. True to your word."

Dennis swallowed.

Robby continued: "I figured you packed your things and went back to Nebraska. Not that I knew for sure, but I *hoped*... I think I hoped you didn't. It just would've meant that I pushed you back to a family that was gonna get you admitted, or hurt, or... *killed."* He paused, swallowing the lump of emotion in his throat. "And every day since, I imagined what could've been, had I not been a fucking idiot and let you slip away."

"Then why'd you let me leave? That night in the clinic."

With total sincerity, Robby softly asked, "Would anything I could've said have stopped you?"

Dennis paused. His eyes admitted more than he wanted to say. But, to be kind, he opted for a very unconvincing, "...I don't know."

In truth, he didn't really know or remember what he wanted to hear that night, all those years ago. He knew it felt like his world was ending, that was a distinct, unforgettable feeling which stuck with him even now, ten years later. But as for the rest, he'd truly and honestly forgotten almost all of it. Robby, as a person, had become little more than a ghost from his past, one which stuck around like a whisper in the wind as he trudged through undergrad and medical school.

"I don't *remember,"* he added, quiet as a mouse.

A somber silence fell between the two of them.

Robby watched as Dennis looked anywhere but at him, hands clasped together in front of him, fidgeting as he always did when he felt anxious or nervous. He relished every second that passed, standing just in front of his boy. Standing just in front of the only person on the planet who shared his most vulnerable secret.

There was a twisted kind of bond in that.

Knowing that Dennis Whitaker was the only man who'd ever seen him explore a new kind of love. Knowing that he was the only person who'd ever seen Robby so painfully enamored by the one thing in the world he would not allow himself to have, all those years ago in Tennessee.

Because for Michael Robinavitch, needing a woman was natural.

But needing a man— no, needing *Dennis Whitaker,* was utterly inimitable.

To need Dennis Whitaker was to swim against the current of the raging river. To need Dennis Whitaker was to search for a dim light in the crushing darkness at the bottom of the ocean. To need Dennis Whitaker was to hold tightly to the handleless blade, carving the path forward despite the cuts to his palms.

It was a force that, all these years, possessed Robby to weather the pain, if only for a taste of what could yet lay beyond.

"...If it *really* bothers you," Robby broke the silence tentatively, "I'll wear my helmet home tonight."

"I'd appreciate that," Dennis stated. "But that shouldn't need to be said—"

"—If you'll let me kiss you goodbye."

Dennis blinked, taken back.

"What?" The boy chuckled nervously, like he believed he heard Robby incorrectly.

The older man didn't respond, though. Didn't elaborate. He just stared intently, which was answer enough to Dennis that he *did* hear correctly.

"...I'm not so sure God would like that," he muttered, pinching his wrist.

"Do you still believe in God?" Robby asked with total sincerity. "After everything you saw in there today?"

Avoiding having to answer that heavy question, Dennis posed another point: "And, we don't know each other anymore. Not like that."

Robby figured that might be the answer. He was, of course, aware of how pitiful he sounded asking for a goodbye kiss from a stranger he hadn't known in ten years, but that stranger wasn't so strange to *him.* Dennis Whitaker was the last dim, familiar light remaining in his life.

He just wouldn't admit it.

"I know," Robby nodded. Quieter and more ashamed, he said, "I know."

There was a pause.

"...Only if it gets you home in one piece," Dennis spoke like he was trying to convince himself *that* was the only reason.

Robby looked up, eyes lighting subtly as he met the younger man's gaze. He looked around at the dark, small parking lot. Totally empty.

Before Dennis could change his mind, Robby closed the space between them with an embarrassing eagerness—a primal hunger. He cupped the younger man's face in his hands, leaning himself down just enough to steal those familiar lips. They were chapped, and the taste on his tongue was stale. It wasn't a glamorous kiss. In fact, it was quite messy. Quite unpracticed. But Robby didn't care.

He couldn't care at all, because it was Dennis Whitaker.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I say this all the time but genuinely, thank you SO much for all the love and support for this story. I'm so baffled each week, 'cause it seems like more and more people show up and it's just... really nice to see :')) thanks for sticking around w/ me.

Happy Pitt Season 2 time! I'll be able to make more trailers now that we have more footage LOL.

Also, if you'd like to keep up with this story (and my other work), you can follow me on Twitter!

Chapter 12: I'm Your Man

Chapter Summary

> Robby makes up for his mistakes and opens up to Dennis, but an incident with a patient completely shuts Dennis down.

Chapter Notes

> Chapter 12's song is "I'm Your Man" from Mitski's 2023 album, "The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had only been three days in the Presby ED, and Dennis Whitaker had already succumbed to Michael Robinavitch.

"J-Jesus *fucking..."* the older man grunted, lips pressed against the back of Dennis' neck.

After having sheathed himself with a condom, he sank into Dennis from behind, splitting him open and savoring each sweet, stifled little whine he was able to pull from him.

"Look at *you,"* Robby sighed as he bottomed out. "My boy. My pretty boy."

Robby eagerly watched Dennis splay out his arms, fists balling into the sheets of Robby's bed as he fought through the overwhelm of being pried open so intimately. He arched his back just enough to keep Robby comfortable, cheek pressed into the man's pillow, which smelled overwhelmingly like him.

"You can move," Dennis mumbled, trying to bury the shame of it all.

"You sure?" Robby kissed behind the shell of Dennis' ear. "I can wait a second."

"I don't want you to wait."

"But if you *need* me to, I can—"

"Please just fuck me," he practically whined, impatience on his tongue.

Robby's heart skipped a beat and his cock twitched inside of Dennis.

"Say that again."

Dennis did not immediately respond. He didn't *want* to enjoy the way he affected the older man, but he *did*.

"Come on," Robby nudged with his nose, still buried to the hilt inside of Dennis. "Say it."

"Fuck—" Dennis began, but his jaw snapped shut when Robby's hand snuck around and pinched his nipple.

The way Dennis clamped down on his manhood when he touched that sweet spot sent a jolt of hot pleasure through Robby's loins. He groaned into the shell of Dennis' ear, begging one more time earnestly,

"Say it for me."

"P-please," Dennis quivered, "fuck me."

Any opportunity to feel the weight of guilt for saying such lewd things was utterly discarded when Dennis felt Robby pull himself out and slam back in. The overwhelming pressure and friction against his walls was an incomparable combination of pain and pleasure.

"That's it," Robby grunted as he fucked inside, ghosting his hands down Dennis' sides and finding purchase on his hips, grabbing tight and pulling the younger man back to fuck deeper with each thrust.

By that point, Dennis was - and he did not care to dwell on how embarrassing it was - quite literally drooling on Robby's pillow, jaw slack as wet whimpers spilled from his throat.

"Yeah? That's my good boy," Robby droned mindlessly in a low, gravelly voice as he fucked, hips beginning to slap against Dennis' backside.

He let go of one hip, reaching his hand back up and sticking his index and middle finger in Dennis' mouth, grinning when Dennis closed his wetted lips around them. The younger man, of course, continued to whine, but it was all muffled around Robby's rather large digits, and he relished feeling Dennis suck mindlessly while he slammed in and out.

"That's it, sweetheart."

Dennis sighed, "I can't stay."

"I've already got the pot pie in the oven," Robby protested.

"My roommate might worry."

"Santos?" Robby cast a deadpan look.

Realizing how stupid that sounded, Dennis corrected himself quickly: "She'll be *curious."*

"I should at least clean you up," Robby tried instead, pulling out of Dennis' sweet, worked hole and squeezing the left cheek of his ass before sitting upright.

Dennis shifted in the bed so that he eyed Robby.

Robby cast an unwavering look.

"...Can I lay here for a bit first?"

"You can lay here all you want."

Reaching for the pack of Winston cigarettes and lighter on his nightstand, Robby pulled one and lit the end, perching it between his teeth as he swung his legs off the side of the bed. He sat there, back toward Dennis as he took a drag.

"Not that you need *me* to tell you," Dennis began.

"I know it's bad for my lungs," Robby interrupted softly.

"Have you still been smoking all this time?"

The older man paused, as if contemplating the worth of explaining his smoking habits.

"...Not the whole decade."

"Oh," Dennis reached out his arm, flattening his palm against Robby's spine. The man's skin was warm. "What changed?"

"Are you more interested in why I quit? Or why I started again?"

"I'd sit to hear both."

"...Heather," Robby exhaled smoke which ghosted over to the wall. Dennis watched from behind, hand still firm on Robby's back. "She wanted to try for a baby."

"Oh," Dennis swallowed, brows furrowing together. "...You two?"

Robby nodded.

"'64 was a big year. Soon as the bill passed, she came to work in the clinic, and even before that, we'd started to rely on one another quite a bit. She, uh..." the older man cleared his throat, tap-tapping his cigarette into the ashtray on his nightstand, "we agreed to try."

"It never worked out?" Dennis asked, but did so very cautiously, retracting his hand from Robby's back.

"No, it did," Robby corrected. "It did."

"Oh," Dennis' heart made a few unexplainable movements. Did it drop? Not necessarily. But did it skip a few beats and twirl him around? Most *certainly.* "You're a father."

"I'm not," Robby shook his head.

Then, he took a long, long drag of his cigarette, forcing a silence between the two of them that could only have meant one thing.

"Oh," Dennis realized. "I'm... gosh— I'm so sorry."

"Well, y'know. The rate was something like fifteen percent in '64. Just got unlucky. I don't think she was able to deal with that pain, though. We went our separate ways afterward and she headed off to school."

"School? She a doctor yet?"

"I don't really know, Whitaker," Robby admitted. "I didn't keep in contact. I'd imagine she's in Nashville. Maybe nearing the end of med school by now if things've gone well."

Dennis Whitaker never, even after realizing his sexual relations with Robby, felt insecure about his place. Perhaps because of the nature of them both being men; one could not tell the other's secrets without telling his own. That made their dynamic a little incomparable to whatever he imagined Robby had with Heather.

As was so often the case, though: Dennis *did* wonder if their dynamic had ever been as tangible as a man and a woman's.

"How 'bout we shower?" Robby offered, probably to toss their conversation under the rug.

Dennis didn't mind. "Yeah."

So, together, they showered in Robby's fancy little bathroom. His apartment was quite nice, as should've been expected. But it was a far cry from the home he'd made in Franklin. The lights were not warm, and the walls were not decorated even by an unexpressive man's standards.

The only home Dennis found in that place was the warmth of Robby's skin as they clung to one another under the showerhead. Robby pressed himself flush against Dennis from behind, wrapping his arms around him and leaving little kisses behind his ear and on his wet shoulders.

This kind of intimacy was so *very* new to Dennis, and Robby sensed it. He was careful not to push further than he judged was comfortable for the younger man. He only touched when Dennis touched. He only kissed when Dennis tilted his neck enough for access. He moved based on Dennis' moves, motivated solely by the hunger of his lover.

He truly might've begged to have Dennis again right there in the shower if not for the chicken pot pie needing attention in the oven.

"If you won't sit and eat, at least take it home with you," Robby implored as he set the dish down over the stove.

Dennis eyed the man, who wore nothing but his checkered boxers and oven mitts. All the intimacy and the sexual urges nipping at his skin sent two distinct shocks throughout his body; one of want, one of guilt.

And he could not decide which one was winning.

"What would I tell Trinity?"

"That you brought it home from a diner," Robby shrugged.

A whole pot pie, Dennis snorted.

Instead of fighting back even more, he eyed the familiar dish as the scent carried into his nostrils. Nostalgia was a funny thing; it was so very potent when Dennis smelled things. It sent him straight back to Tennessee. Straight back to the clinic.

"You still know how to make them," he chuckled softly, damp hair dripping onto his shirt as he stood, awkwardly, next to the island.

"I remember the recipe," Robby said, eyes not meeting Dennis' anymore.

He remembers the recipe.

Dennis asked casually, "Did Heather like them?"

"No one's ever known this recipe but you and me."

"But you don't eat chicken pot pies."

"No, I don't."

"So, why?"

"Maybe I was just keeping a light on."

Over the next several days, working in Presby's ED became quite enjoyable, all things considered. Dennis felt that, slowly, Robby began trusting him more and more. He did not coddle him nearly as much, and he did not shy from him like he'd done in Franklin all those years ago after they had sex.

Things felt different this time. They felt unpollutable.

Jeffery Lowe, Presby's CMO, even hired a social worker! Granted, she wasn't technically there for the doctors themselves, but for patients.

"This is Kiara Alfaro," the expensive man gestured.

She waved, flower-print dress flowing like silk as she smiled so very politely. "Nice to meet you all."

Dr. Robby stood in the middle of his Pittlings and his residents at the nurse station, nodding back to be polite.

"She's taking on a new role as our social worker in the ED for those who are going through difficult losses or changes. You'll refer her to any patients that'll need stability or community resources after their stay in our hospital. Those who've lost loved ones, those who've had difficult family dynamics, and everything in between."

Kiara nodded as Jeffery spoke, hands clasped in front of her as she eyed everyone.

"And..." Jeffery looked pointedly at Dr. Robby, "for any of us who need a little help of our own, she's a wonderful woman to speak with."

Robby pursed his lips, crossed his arms, and looked away.

"Let's bump up those metrics, hm?" He nudged Kiara, but looked at everyone in front of him. "Alright Dr. Robinavitch, take it away."

With that dismissal, Jeffery scurried off in his stiff suit, leaving the doctors to disperse, save for Dennis and Robby, who stood just a moment longer.

"You plan to speak to Miss Alfaro?" Dennis asked, crossing his arms. "About your own struggles?"

"I haven't been struggling this week," Robby snorted. "And I don't need a shrink to work through my issues."

"Okay," Dennis said skeptically in a quieted voice.

"Not when I've got you," the older man added almost coquettishly.

Dennis huffed, "You've only got me for three more weeks. If I'm the reason you're doing well..." he stressed the last words: "maybe you should speak with the lady."

His tone zapped the whimsy from Robby's bones. The man had nearly forgotten that Dennis was only on this rotation for the month of July, and then he'd be gone again. Perhaps he'd imagined Dennis would stay.

Only then did it dawn on Robby that he *could* invite Dennis to intern at Presby after he graduated. Perhaps it was something to consider.

Or perhaps that was a dumb, dangerous idea.

Dennis had already walked away, leaving the man in the dust to take on patients and assist wherever he was directed. He spent several hours doing so, until, after a particularly feisty intoxicated patient, Trinity dragged him aside and down the hall.

"What the hell?" Dennis hissed.

Her grip on his bicep was quite strong. When she finally stopped them, away from the general crowd of the ED, she leaned close and whispered:

"I'm gonna tell you something that you can't tell *anyone* else about."

"Oh *Christ..."* Dennis groaned, already unhappy with whatever drama he was about to be pulled into.

"And I'm only telling *you,"* Trinity prefaced, "'Cause you seem to know Robby pretty well. So, I dunno... maybe you'd know how to navigate this fucking *strange* situation."

"What do you mean 'strange'? What's going on?"

Trinity paused for a moment, trying to figure out how to say it. But clearly, there was no 'best' way to say it, so she shook her head and inhaled sharply.

"I think Dr. Langdon has been stealing meds from Presby."

"What?"

Trinity nodded with a strained, toothy smile on her face.

"Yeah."

"What?"

"Yeah."

Dennis whipped his head around, scanning to make sure no one was near. "Why are you saying this?"

"Because it's true?"

"No— I mean, what did you see? What the hell did you..."

Trinity sighed, smearing her palms over her face. "Our first day here I had a patient. That Louie guy."

"Mr. Cloverfield? The drunk?"

"That guy. He came in with half the pills he was prescribed that *same* morning. Pretty weird, huh? So I go and check with Flora, and on the files it says half that prescription was returned. But Louie *swore* he wasn't told about any returns. Just that Dr. Langdon had discharged him and sent him with ten pills."

"Did you report it?"

"Hell no. Flora didn't want me pushing it any further, so I didn't. And everything was fine for most the week."

"But..." Dennis surmised.

"But," Trinity fished into the pocket of her scrubs and pulled out a vial, holding it in her palm for Dennis to examine. "Chlordiazepoxide. I needed it for a patient today, and I couldn't get the *fucking* cap off."

"...Couldn't that be any number of causes?"

"It could. No— you're right, Huckleberry, it could." She bit her lip. "But I checked the log anyway."

Dennis groaned, realizing he wanted very little more to do with this.

"I checked the log anyway, and it was *Langdon.* He pulled the vial and then returned it as untouched not even thirty minutes later."

"I've really gotta go help with a patient," Dennis tried pushing past.

Trinity stopped him, a pleading tone in her voice, which, in Dennis' experience, was very out of character for Trinity Santos.

"Wait," she tried. "What would *you* do? What's Robby like? Should I go over our senior residents' heads and just... I dunno, tell him?"

"I don't know Dr. Robby like that—"

"Jesus Christ, Huckleberry, level with me for once. Be *honest."*

The sharp look she offered him set the boy straight, and he squirmed under it. Jaw clenched, he shook his head, shrugging.

"I don't know. I wouldn't..." he trailed off, thinking of how to solve this issue without really solving it. Thinking of how to keep it from blowing up in Robby's face. "I wouldn't tell him yet. He's probably got a lot going on."

"Yeah," Trinity sighed, agreeing begrudgingly.

"Leave it alone until you're really, *absolutely* certain about this. Then..."

Dennis couldn't really verbalize it.

He didn't want to be the one who explicitly told Trinity to report to Robby, especially because he now knew intimately well what kind of mental state Robby had been in for the last ten years. If it turned out the golden resident of the ED had been nabbing meds from right under

his nose? If Dennis allowed Trinity to pull that trigger? Knowing that Robby and Langdon were - on some level, as unclear as it was to Dennis - good friends?

As unstable as Robby had been before Dennis arrived and as unstable as he very well might become again once Dennis departed after his rotation? He was only in Presby for three more weeks, and he knew well enough what kind of man Dr. Robby was without a support system. Not that he had much of one in Pittsburgh right now anyway, but it could *always* be worse. And if Dennis Whitaker were the one to *make* it worse by allowing Trinity to pull that plug for him in the form of Frank Langdon?

Who knew what Michael Robinavitch would do.

It must've been some kind of divine punishment that Dennis was roped into treating a patient with Dr. Langdon and Dr. Robby mere minutes after having learned of the senior resident's... *alleged* habits.

"Patient is Elijah Hale, age forty-eight. Came in complaining about severe stomach pain and vomiting. Mr. Hale, how we doin'?" Langdon fired away as he introduced the hefty man to Robby, Dennis, and Princess.

"Not much better," the man tried - politely, in his defense - while wincing. "Couldn't even get through my shift."

"Oh yeah? What do you do?" Dennis added to the conversation as he helped prepare the room.

"I build docks. Murphy Maritime."

They worked like that for several minutes. Keeping the patient in conversation while assessing vitals and digging for the source of his pain through key information. It was something Dennis naturally outshone Langdon at; Robby noticed, too. He'd been noticing all week.

Dennis Whitaker may have had a rough first shift, but he was *very* good at this.

"Diagnosis?" Dr. Robby asked quietly after pulling the two men aside.

"Isn't it obvious?" Langdon snorted. "Dude drowns himself in drinks every night. Add to that the coffee-ground emesis, epigastric pain with stable blood pressure and *zero* peritoneal signs, I'm thinking acute alcoholic gastritis. Possibility of peptic ulcer disease."

Dennis cocked an eyebrow, but didn't immediately speak up.

"How do we treat it?" Dr. Robby glanced at Dennis, then back at Dr. Langdon.

"NPO. He'll need IV fluids, antacids, and cimetidine if necessary. Then we can admit him to medicine and have him observed for bleeding."

"Not a bad—"

"I don't know that that's right," Dennis interrupted softly. *Nervously.* He had a look on his face, like he didn't want what was on his mind to be true. Like he dreaded it.

Dr. Robby glanced at him, arms crossed as he said, "Whitaker?"

Dr. Langdon cast a kind of skeptical look, one that screamed, *you think you're right and I'm wrong?*

"Based on his own description, the pain was pretty far out of proportion to our findings, right?"

"Sure," Robby nodded, allowing the boy to continue.

"Tachycardia with no significant fever, but he's got coffee-ground emesis with heme-positive stool yet almost *no* abdominal tenderness. But yet he mentioned it hurt *worse* after eating."

Robby's eyes widened ever so subtly, like he was suddenly connecting some very alarming dots. Langdon looked back and forth between the two of them, confused.

"Dr. Robby and I have had a patient or two like this in Franklin before," Dennis blurted. "People drink all the time so sometimes it goes missed that there might be..."

"Acute mesenteric ischemia," Robby surmised, rubbing his beard.

"Exactly."

"What?" Langdon scoffed. "That's a *stretch*— you'd need to order a surgical consult immediately. How do you explain that to him when-"

Robby was already in motion, hustling back into Mr. Hale's room and explaining, "Mr. Hale, we're gonna need to get you upstairs very quickly. There's a real good chance you've got a blockage to the blood flow in your intestines, so we'll need to act fast."

The patient gulped with brows tighter than bowstrings, "Is that serious?"

"Very," Robby nodded.

Langdon stood toward the back of the room the whole way while Dennis, Robby, and Princess called for surgical consult and prepared to send the patient up to the OR. He was a mix of many things in that moment: shocked that Robby had shoved his diagnosis to the side for a med student's? *Yes, of course.* Confused that Dennis had mentioned working with Robby in Franklin, Tennessee? *Oh, very.*

Langdon knew very little of Michael Robinavitch's past, but what he thought he knew was that the man had worked with Dr. Mohan at a clinic and then moved to Pittsburgh in the late

'60s. What he did *not* know - and perhaps still didn't fully know was true - was that Dennis was there, too? Or at least, the med student had just *implied* he was.

But what, exactly, that meant about their dynamic, Langdon did not know. He could sense it, though. He could sense Robby's affinity for Dennis Whitaker. The way they clung to one another in the ED, the way Robby relied increasingly on Dennis' help as the week went on, pushing Langdon himself further and further to the side. Not unlike a chewed toy he'd now discarded.

"Really good call, Whitaker," Robby praised, bumping fists with him as Mr. Hale was wheeled off for the OR. Dennis stared up at the attending with a shimmer of awe in his eyes. Awe at being praised, awe at being validated.

"Thank you," he muttered back as butterflies tickled inside him.

Langdon watched with a scrunched nose, arms crossed as he clenched his jaw and forced himself to turn away. He stomped down the hall, but didn't make it very far: another thing caught his eye.

Trinity Santos.

She sat in the rolling chair at the nurse station, scribbling away at a patient chart. Langdon knew better, he shouldn't have felt such an urge to bother anyone about whatever past Dennis and Robby had, whatever friendly dynamic they shared. And he especially knew to stay away from Trinity; he'd already been on her ass the whole week, defensive against her nosey, sharp nature.

But if anyone knew about Dennis, it was probably Trinity Santos.

"Yo," he tried casually, leaning into the counter across from her.

She didn't look up. Just sighed, and said, "Come to yell at me?"

"You haven't given me much to yell at today," he offered, a little more sarcastically than it should've been.

"Day's not over yet," she looked up with a glint in her eyes.

Langdon didn't care to unpack that, so he brushed it off. "So, uh... you're roommates with Whitaker, yeah?"

She squinted and cocked her head a little.

"...Yeah. Sorta."

"Rad."

"What's it to you?"

Langdon shrugged. "Just been around him a lot today. He's an interesting dude."

Trinity offered a cautious *"Uh-huh."*

An awkward pause fell between them, but their eyes remained in battle with one another.

"You know much about him?"

"Not more than I ask," she stated cut and dry.

"How much do you ask?"

"Is this like-" Trinity slammed her pen down "-an interrogation?"

"No," Langdon became a little defensive. "I just— dude's interesting. We were working on a patient just now and I thought I heard him say something about working with Robby a long time ago."

Trinity forgot to breathe.

"A long time ago?"

"Yeah, I mean, maybe I heard wrong. But I know Robby used to run a private practice out some backwoods town in Tennessee. It's, uh," he tried sounding as casual as possible, "it's how he met Dr. Mohan. I was aware *she* worked for him a while. She was a med student in Nashville. But I... didn't know Whitaker did, too. Just... wondered if that's why they've been kissing each other's asses all week."

Everything came together for Trinity Santos, like a divine light shone upon a long-lost truth. Dennis had told her all about a doctor that once saved him in Tennessee. A doctor that had taken him in and taught him most everything he knew about medicine prior to med school. A doctor that had - in her opinion - really tested the limits of doctoral ethics, given what she'd heard from Dennis.

But... *Michael Robinavitch?*

Forcing herself to stop fidgeting with the tampered vial in her scrub pockets, she let go, pulling her free hand out and resting it over her patient chart.

Leaning into the table, Trinity shrugged and said:

"I don't know anything about it."

That same night, hardly an hour after their day shift had ended, Robby rushed Dennis over to his apartment once again. He fucked Dennis in his bed, much in the same way he'd done earlier in the week, for the first time in years.

They'd planned to use a condom, but that step of the process got stomped over in the midst of their hungry kisses on the way from the front door to the bedroom. And by the time Robby had stripped Dennis of all his clothes - then fished his own cock out of his underwear after only hardly shimmying his cargo pants down to his knees - they had a short moment of transparency.

"Rubber?" Robby groaned into the back of Dennis' ear, cock resting heavily over the cleft of his ass.

Dennis shook his head. "You're the doctor. You tell me."

"Oh- don't test my ability to think responsibly right now, pretty thing."

"Do what you need to do," the younger man panted into the sheets, brain fogged by lust.

So Robby fucked Dennis, intimately and eagerly. Skin to skin, feeling every inch of the younger man's insides as he invited himself inside deeper and deeper with each thrust, cargo pants still half-on. He couldn't help but steal kisses from the back of Dennis' neck as he did it, and after a minute or so, Robby turned the younger man over on his back so that they could look at one another.

Robby licked into Dennis' mouth and captured each sweet whine, tasting him and savoring the odd battle for dominance between their tongues. That contact only served to fuel his thrusts, and before he knew it, he was spilling over, riding through his climax, buried in the crook of Dennis' neck as he let out near-primal growls of pleasure.

When that white-hot orgasm subsided and it was all over, Robby shimmied down the bed and lapped hungrily at his own seed as it leaked from inside Dennis. A symphony of wet noise buzzed in the younger man's ears, heating the skin on his cheeks as he held his legs apart, his back against the head of the bed—just as Robby instructed.

"This is an awful lazy excuse for cleaning up after sex," Dennis quivered through strained breaths.

"Wanna taste?" Robby looked up, only briefly pausing his motions.

"It's been inside me," the younger man grimaced.

Robby pressed a kiss into Dennis' inner thigh and mumbling on the soft skin there: "Quite a lot of it, too."

When the older man dove back down, he sucked supple flesh into his teeth and bit the right cheek of Dennis' ass, then continued lapping up his own spill with his tongue, noting how warm his lover's sweet entrance was. Noting how it flinched with every wet flick.

"Trinity told me-" Dennis stifled a gasp as his lover's tongue slipped inside of him "-Dr. Langdon asked about me today. About you and me."

Robby hummed inside of Dennis, shooting hot, reviving waves of pleasure straight into the younger man's milked cock.

"What'd he ask?" The older man mumbled, pulling back and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His beard glistened wet with spit and seed in the dim, cool bedroom light.

Dennis hesitated.

"...She said he asked about Franklin."

"Mm," Robby rubbed his beard on Dennis' inner thigh, beginning a trail of nibbled kisses up to his belly button, over his sternum, beyond his teased nipple, and up to his jawline. "What'd he want to know?"

Robby shimmied the rest of the way out of his cargo pants and tossed them off the side of the bed, laying himself over Dennis like a blanket and tangling their legs together.

"I'm serious, Robby," Dennis protested weakly, tangling his hands in the older man's messy, short brown hair.

"I am too!" He tried not to chuckle.

"No you're not," Dennis sighed. "This isn't— I *don't* want trouble with Dr. Langdon just because of..." he trailed off.

"Frank doesn't do trouble with anyone but Dr. Santos."

Don't I know it, Dennis cursed to himself.

"Well," the younger man tried, "I dunno. It was a little awkward today. After the incident with Mr. Hale."

"Incident? It wasn't an 'incident.' You saw what we couldn't and you saved a man's life."

"And he didn't speak to me again for the rest of the day."

"You miss him?"

Dennis sighed. "This is still funny to you."

"Of course it's not! I'm just assessing if I need to fuck any better so he doesn't steal you from me."

"Christ, almighty," Dennis groaned, rubbing his face.

He tried to slip out from under Robby, but the man dead-weighted over him, moaning into his neck as he begged, "I'll stop, I'll stop. Too far. I'm sorry."

Dennis gave up trying to escape, deciding - a little too easily, as embarrassing as it was - to forgive Robby for his inappropriate humor.

"But I *am* serious, Whitaker. His only gripes are with Dr. Santos. Not that I don't get why. She's a tough nut to get along with, but—"

"—She's just competitive," Dennis defended softly.

"She's disrupting the tempo of my ED."

I fear she has a reason, Dennis did not say.

Instead, he let out a soft little sigh, tickling Robby's ear as he reached his hand over to rub the man's back. "Just... *please* be careful at work. I don't want any trouble with anyone."

"...Alright."

Two more weeks passed in an instant, and for the most part during that time, Robby obeyed Dennis' wishes. The two of them had gotten into the habit of meeting twice a week to enjoy one another, then they'd part ways and act none the closer in Presby's ED.

It was, in itself, a rotation of intimacy. And they hid it *very* well.

"Coming home late tonight, Huckleberry?"

Trinity sauntered up behind him as he finished scribbling in his patient chart. Dennis did not look up, but he remained very casual as he said, "Yeah, probably. It's Thursday."

"Late on Thursdays and Sundays, I know, I know." Then, Trinity leaned close, nudging him with her shoulder as she whispered, "So who've you been getting lucky with?"

A red flush poured out onto Dennis' cheeks, and he whipped his head up, sputtering as he said, "Why is *that* your first conclusion?"

"You should be thanking me for not asking way earlier."

"Then you should thank *me* for not asking why I need to turn on the noisy fan anytime Dr. Garcia is over."

Trinity shrugged smugly. "Ask all you want about that, Huckleberry."

He stared at her for a moment with slackened eyelids.

"I'm alright."

Trinity turned around, leaning her back against the edge of the desk and resting her elbows on it as she groaned, throwing her head back. "You're really not gonna tell me who you've been sleeping with? Your rotation ends on Sunday anyway, what's the harm?"

Before Dennis could argue any more, Dr. Langdon called out, "Whitaker."

The med student looked up, and so did Trinity. She had a sour look on her face, peeling her eyes away from the senior resident as soon as they found him.

"When's the last time you checked on Janie Rowland?"

Dr. Langdon had a bite in his voice, impatient. *Insecure.*

His eyes darted between Dr. Santos and Whitaker, but he left a pungent, narrow stare at the girl.

"Uh," Dennis found the words, pointing to the chart in front of him. "I was just filling out her chart. I was in there about five minutes ago?"

"She's got a family visitor in the room waiting to hear the good word. You need to stay on top of these things," he snapped with his fingers, shaking his head. Then, he added - in a mumble almost too quiet to hear: "If you wanna stay on Robby's good side."

Trinity's eyebrow twitched.

"Yeah," Dennis resigned meekly. "I'm on it."

He grabbed his clipboard and headed down the hall, passing Dr. Langdon, who offered one last sharp glance at Trinity. She returned it in kind.

When Dennis rounded the corner and stepped into his patient's room, a new face stood at bedside. A man. Likely her husband.

Dennis nodded as a greeting, and the man looked up, but didn't exchange any greetings of his own. He looked unkempt; he looked like he worked in labor and had come from work to see the woman. That made sense, too, seeing as how:

"Miss Rowland is intubated and sedated right now. But she's stable," Dennis nodded with a polite smile. "We've already paged a neuro consult to come and assess the extent of her injury, so once he's down here, we'll know a lot more—"

"Have you been doctoring her the whole time?" The man asked, voice husky like a smoker. He eyed Dennis with a kind of... *familiarity?*

"Well," Dennis paused. "Yes. I mean— I've been *helping*. Dr. Robby is her assigned physician but he had me help on the case. I'm just here to check up on her and update you on —"

"—So they're lettin' you handle my sister?"

"'Handle'?"

"You've been in here touching the-" the man glanced around "-machines and the tools and whatnot. Doctoring my sister."

"...Yes. I've been assisting to stabilize her. She arrived at Presby in critical condition."

"They let queers do all that shit around here, huh?"

Dennis blinked. His heart skipped a beat.

"Pardon?"

The man stepped away from the bed, just a step or two back. He turned and pointed his finger at Dennis. "I saw you at that bar in Oakland a few weeks ago. Dancin' n' kissin' up on a man." He nodded. *"Knew* you looked familiar."

Immediately - like a survival instinct at this point - Dennis denied it. "Sir, I really don't know what you're talking about," and he chuckled nervously.

"You think I'm fuckin' dumb? Or blind? Watching you pushin' around that place, drunker than piss, clinging onto the walls. I didn't forget."

Denial, clearly, wasn't an option. And it was - in Dennis' defense - the first time it failed as an option, so he started winging it. Very defensively, too.

"I'm sure you're aware what kind of bar that is," Dennis reminded, sticking nose up, "so why were *you* there?"

"I was pickin' Janie up," the man gestured to his sister, who still lay unconscious in the bed beside him.

Dennis squinted.

As if things couldn't get any more awkward, Dr. Robby hustled into the room, none the wiser about the tense energy as he nudged Dennis and nodded at the man to greet him. It was just another round, for him.

"Whitaker, what've we got for Janie?"

Eyes firmly fixated on Janie's brother, Dennis read off of his chart: "We called for neuro consult. Stabilized her and continuing regular monitoring until they arrive. We'll play off their findings, but expect to send her up for surgery."

Dr. Robby nodded, rubbing his palms together. "Excellent, excellent."

Then, he extended his hand, offering to shake the man's. "I'm Dr. Robby, you must be Will? Janie's brother?"

The man didn't reach out his hand. Instead, he clenched his jaw and said, "You really let the mentally ill deal with patients in this place?"

Robby blinked and cocked his head, taken back by that sudden question. He wondered innocently, *Mentally ill? Who's mentally ill?*

"That's the kind of hospital this is?" Will scoffed, pointing at Dennis. "This doctor of yours was kissing up on a *man.* At a college bar last month."

"Student doctor," Robby corrected, inappropriately lacing a little humor in his voice as he tried to assess what the man had just said.

Dennis gnawed at his cheek until he drew blood, stiff next to Robby as he fidgeted with the clipboard in his hands. He wasn't really sure how to deal with this situation. Should he just stand there and take it? Should he step out and let Robby deal with it? Indecision turned into utter inaction, and he froze in place like a deer in headlights.

On Robby's end, his brain was running a million miles a minute trying to imagine Dennis Whitaker at a *bar* kissing up on men in *public.* For all he knew, Will Rowland was lying. But even if he wasn't— Robby didn't like the way he spoke.

And Robby had changed a *lot* in ten years.

"The guy's a full-fuckin' queer. He shouldn't have his dirty hands anywhere near a patient. And definitely not my sister."

"There's absolutely no reason he shouldn't," Robby spoke up, the humor had been sapped from his voice. "He's a very *skilled* student doctor, and he's been carrying this department on his back since he came in last month."

"He's been here a whole *month?"*

"Yes, sir, that's generally how student medical rotations work."

"Jesus Christ..." Will truly shuddered. His voice raised and bubbled with anger as he spat out: "All those people - and the *men* - he's been touchin'. Who knows what perverted thoughts are goin' through his head when they're under.*"*

If there *was* a chance that Dennis would feel comfortable in his identity anytime soon, that chance was now, probably, utterly mangled like roadkill.

Dennis tried to speak up as shaken as he was, "I'm not—"

Robby placed a hand on his shoulder, stepping between the two men and casting a very unpleasant look upon Will. "This kid saved your sister's life. She came in with a skull fracture gnarly enough to kill a man and is gonna live to tell the tale to her kids and grandkids thanks to-" he pointed behind him to Dennis *"-my* student doctor."

"Doesn't change the fact he's sick in the head," the man grumbled stubbornly, resisting Robby's positive redirection.

That only served to agitate the attending more. Far more.

"Mr. Rowland— it's Mr. Rowland, right?" Robby took another step forward, voice low. "You are in *my* hospital right now. We put up with shit you could not imagine in this department and we do it with smiles on our faces every fucking day. Let me remind you," he took yet another step forward. "You're in *my* hospital. And in *my* hospital, you will treat my doctors and my nurses with respect or so help me God—"

"What? What'll you do?"

"What'll I do," Robby chuckled, cocking his head.

"Dr. Robby," Dennis tried meekly from behind, but the man shushed him with a waving hand.

"You're sucking ass to a *faggot,* my man," Will nodded.

The attending rubbed his beard and shook his head with a pungent smile on his face.

"I'll toss you out of my fucking hospital."

Will yelled, "Toss *me* out? Toss *him* out!"

"For what? *Unfortunately,"* Robby said sarcastically, "you can't prove he's done anything to warrant repercussions-"

"-Robby, I don't need you fighting my battles-"

"-and good fucking luck getting anyone to bat an eye at a homosexual right now. Pittsburgh's got way bigger fish to fry." Dr. Robby's voice was raised now, too.

The situation was devolving very fast.

He and Will were in each other's faces now, and Will was shouting nonsense by that point, all up in Robby's space. Not a minute later, Dr. Abbot and Dr. Langdon ran in, quite shocked to see their attending so out of character: totally heated.

A far cry from his usual reasonable and *relatively* composed self.

"The hell's all this yelling for?" Abbot raised an eyebrow, stepping between Robby and Will. "Hey, knock it off. This is a *hospital,* my friend," he said to Will.

"This fuckin' dude's letting a homosexual run around the hospital touching patients!"

Dr. Abbot looked back at Dennis, who Will was pointing to. The kid stood stiff as a tree, jaw beyond clenched.

Then, Dr. Abbot looked back at Will, and he whispered, "I don't give a damn what your reason is. Stop yelling like a hooligan in this hospital. Let us save lives in relative *peace,* hm?" He looked down at Janie, finding ways to persuade the man to calm down. "This your sister?"

Will nodded, begrudgingly.

"Hey," Abbot directed Will to look at him. "These fine gentlemen are saving her damn life, my friend. Best doctors I know. Why don't you and I step out and let them do that? God forbid we fuck something up in here and ruin her recovery."

Dr. Langdon placed a reassuring hand on Dennis' back as the two of them watched Abbot talk Will down from rage. Robby stood aside, at the foot of the bed, refusing to look in their direction as he gnawed at his lip.

When Abbot finally - after another minute of rambling and spat insults - convinced Will to calm down, he walked the man out of the room, leaving Langdon and Robby to assess Whitaker.

"Don't worry about him," Dr. Langdon tried. "You've done good in here today, Whitaker. He's just a prick."

Dennis did not respond, verbally or otherwise.

So Langdon tried adding: "I don't believe the guy anyway, but even *if*... y'know," he couldn't bring himself to say the words. "Robby's right. Pittsburgh's got bigger fish to fry."

Oh, fan-fucking-tastic. He heard all of that, Dennis thought to himself.

When, once again, Dennis did not respond, Langdon took his awkward leave, nodding and leaving Robby and Dennis alone in the room with the - thankfully - sedated Janie Rowland.

The silence was short-lived, but it was deafening, and not even the chatter and cacophony of the Presby ED could penetrate it.

Dennis was the one to break it:

"I told you I didn't want any trouble."

Robby looked up from the floor, into Dennis' eyes.

Dennis clarified sternly: "I appreciate you trying to stick up for me, but *that* was..."

"Ah, you had it handled?" The attending huffed.

"I *would've,"* Dennis defended himself.

"With that asshole? I don't think so."

"Well I wouldn't have gotten in his face and incited a tantrum," Dennis bit back. "Now the whole ED..." *knows.*

"Nobody heard anything," Robby denied irrationally.

"Langdon heard!"

"Christ," Robby groaned, palming his eyes. "Langdon doesn't *give a shit,* Whitaker. This is a goddamned hospital. He's not gonna run around the department telling everyone he thinks you kiss men at college bars."

The way Robby said that, he almost sounded jealous. Or maybe just bitter.

"...I *don't* kiss men at college bars," the med student spat.

"What does it matter anyway? It's not my business what you do."

"You sound like you *want* it to be your business."

"Well maybe I do."

The words came out like punches in delivery, but Robby having said that turned the air between them into a weird... intimate hodgepodge of unspoken emotions.

Sure, they'd been having sex with one another - quite regularly - for almost a month now, but neither Dennis nor Robby had really thought too terribly much about it aside from their occasional conversations after the deed.

Their relationship was wholly undefined, guided only by their intense need for one another.

The two of them never spoke about what that need really meant. What that need indicated. What that need would say about whatever future they may or may not have dreamed of having with one another. Robby certainly wondered. Robby certainly *wanted.*

But he really wasn't sure whether or not Dennis did.

"I've got other patients," the younger man sighed, trying to disregard Robby's comment as he stepped out of the room.

Dennis' heart slammed against his chest with every foot forward.

Unsurprisingly, Dennis ended up closing off, deciding to go home with Trinity that night.

She rushed him into their apartment, slamming the door behind him and ushering him into their quaint little kitchen. With a concerned look on his face, Dennis tensed up, hardly meeting Trinity's eyes.

"Why were you and Robby arguing in that patient's room today?"

For once, her tone held no sarcasm, no humor - just concern.

"We weren't arguing," Dennis shrugged. "What'd you hear?"

"I only caught the tail end of it. After Dr. Langdon walked out."

"If you'd hear more, you'd know—"

"—Dennis," Trinity's voice cut through the noise.

He'd never heard his real name from her mouth before.

It forced him to pause.

"Just... can you be *honest* with me? I've been a pretty fucking good friend. And I haven't bugged you about it in weeks, but I hardly know a thing about you!"

"I'm being honest."

"No you're not," Trinity scoffed, then entirely against better judgment, she blurted: "I know about you and Robby!"

The boy bit down on his cheek, eye twitching.

Calming himself and tempering his emotions, Dennis forced a shrug. "I don't know what you think you know, or what you think you heard, but it's—"

"You're lying."

"I'm not lying."

"You're lying!"

"I'm not lying, you just have an insatiable need to be *right!"*

Trinity paused.

"I'm sorry," he was already apologizing, wincing. "I'm sorry."

"It's fucking ridiculous that I had to learn it from *Langdon*," Trinity shook her head.

"Langdon told you?"

"He asked about it a few weeks ago and I connected the dots. He was just wondering why you and Robby have been so..."

"What? 'So' what?"

"Up each other's asses! I don't know!"

A very strange wave of emotions swallowed Dennis whole, right in front of Trinity Santos. His anger fizzled out, leaving only pain. His frustration melted, leaving only a hollow sense of... defeat.

"My God," he groaned, losing his balance for a moment.

Trinity nearly reached out to catch him, like he really was going to fall. Her brows knitted with a newfound kind of concern as he seemed to lose his marbles.

"My fucking God," he mumbled into his palms, smearing them over his face. "I'm so tired."

"What?"

"I'm tired," he repeated, forcing the air from his lungs. "I'm so tired of it."

"Tired of *what?"*

"All of it. The lying, the hiding, the... the fear of someone knowing, the... the-" he choked up "-the big *spectacle* of it all. I can't do what I need to do without feeling like everyone's watching me and judging me and I'm stuck inside of myself, and I've been stuck like this for so long that I don't even know who I am - just who everyone else *wants* me to be. And, and- I have moments of clarity where I beg myself to loosen up and I really, *really* try to, but I flinch at every touch and I bottle up every single—"

"I don't even know what you're saying anymore—"

"—I'm in love with him!"

Trinity blinked. And then she opened her mouth, and no words came out. Then she closed her mouth, brows tensing together like bowstrings as she processed.

"You're..." she asked, very confused, "in *love?* With... Dr. Robby?"

Quite immediately, it dawned on him that Trinity may not have been referring to his relationship with Robby, but rather his past in Tennessee with Robby. The moment that realization struck him - the moment he realized he'd just confessed, possibly, his deepest secret, to Trinity Santos - the tears behind his eyes lost all mercy.

He bit down with gritted teeth, staring at his friend as the tears began to pour silently down his flushed cheeks.

"I don't *want* to be," he seethed, no longer able to deny Trinity the truth. "I swear I don't want to be."

"Hey," she frowned, pulling him into a hug.

A *hug.*

What an odd sensation it was, to be cared for - even physically, for that matter - by Trinity Jagged-Edged Santos, a woman so very emotionally closed off. The concern in her eyes before she rested her head on his shoulder stuck in Dennis' mind like the frozen frame of a video. She wrapped her arms around him, rubbing his back soothingly as he wept so very quietly on her shoulder.

They stayed like that in silence for several minutes. To calm himself, Dennis focused on the distant, muffled chatter of college students in the streets below their apartment. He was above

it all in that moment, hidden in his own little bubble. Tucked away.

Safe and sound with the only woman in the world who, now, *really* knew him.

Even Trinity's capacity for emotional vulnerability had its limits, though:

"You better not have gotten snot on this jacket," she joked, pulling away slowly and scanning Dennis' face.

His features were puffy, and the bags under his eyes were far more prominent than usual. His curly little mullet was a mess, and so was the hair atop his head.

"Is he..." she tried, "good to you?"

"He doesn't know," Dennis admitted. "We just..."

"Oh," Trinity nodded. "Sex."

"...Yeah."

"You don't feel pressured or anything, right?"

"No, no— God, no."

An unexplainable wave of relief passed across Trinity's face.

Dennis added: "I know how bad it looks. I'm aware."

"He *is*... your attending. And he's like, a whole decade-and-a-half older than you."

"We've been failing since 1961," Dennis cleared his throat. "I'm aware it won't work out."

"Yeah," Trinity agreed. "I mean, fun's one thing." She jabbed her thumb into her chest, "I love fun. Sex is *great.* But beyond sex is this... whole weird *thing.* And it can be really tricky when you're trying to navigate this *thing* with a guy who's got years and experience and professional seniority over you."

Be that as it may, true as it may be, Dennis Whitaker loved him.

That, he could not control.

And Trinity saw it on his face. She saw how he reacted to her logic, jaw tensing, eyes watering ever so slightly. He wasn't denying her logic, in fact, he seemed to agree with it. But agreement and execution were far from mutual topics in this conversation, and she recognized that.

So instead, in trying to protect Dennis, she offered a different, but still very honest, approach:

"He's your *attending,* Huckleberry."

"I know," he lamented.

"...If you really love him, you need to get the fuck out of there. You'd both lose your whole lives if that ever got out at a place like Presby. His career, *your* career. It would be a bomb."

Dennis looked up, meeting Trinity's eyes. She sighed, offering one more bit:

"You need to take care of yourself out there."

In lieu of a verbal response, which he was *not* prepared to try, Dennis only nodded.

Three days later, Dennis Whitaker neared the end of his final shift at Presby.

"You could've told me you didn't want to meet on Thursday," Dr. Robby spoke with crossed arms as he walked Dennis down the hall.

"I'm sorry."

"I sat out in the parking lot for thirty minutes," the attending chuckled, almost bitterly, but not quite.

"Trinity needed me at the apartment."

"Did she?"

"...Yeah," he lied.

"I imagined you were just *really* put off by the Will incident."

Dennis looked up into Robby's warm eyes. He, in fact, did *not* look bitter about being left in the dust on Thursday.

"That," Dennis cleared his throat, "well, that definitely didn't help."

"I know part of it's because you don't need me stepping in for you when things like that happen," Robby stopped, guiding his hand up to Dennis' shoulder and urging him to stop walking, too.

They stood in a secluded doorway just a few steps away from the commotion of the nurse station. Robby could see nurse Flora scribbling away from where he stood.

"And I want to apologize," he spoke low to Dennis, hand still on his shoulder. "It'd do me well to have a little more faith in you."

The med student tensed for a second, then relaxed. He nodded, and looked up at his attending through timid eyelashes as he muttered, "Thank you. Sir."

Dr. Robby pulled his hand away slowly, shoving it in the pocket of his black cargo pants, but he did not seem to retract from the conversation itself. Dennis searched the man's eyes, studying the crow's feet of his face. Studying the tired eyes and the weathered skin that he'd known for so long now.

Robby looked like he had something more to say.

"I've got patients," Dennis reminded softly.

"Right," the attending nodded. "Just... really quick, I want to ask you about your rotation."

Here it comes, Dennis dreaded.

"You've enjoyed things here at Presby, hm?"

"...Yes, sir."

In his tone, Dennis tried to remain as neutral as possible. He needed to remain as detached as possible. But he knew what was coming. He'd already suspected Robby might ask him to stay. It was his last shift, after all.

"I know it's a little informal," the attending cleared his throat. "And I'm not even entirely sure what your school schedule looks like for the next few months," *because you won't tell me much about you,* he did not say.

Dennis nodded, but he no longer met the man's eyes. He fidgeted with his fingernails, hands clasped together in front of him.

"...But I'd like you to consider taking an internship here."

"Dr. Robby, I..."

"I know, I know. It's gonna be a lot to think about. But you're a natural at this, Whitaker. You've got experience that the others here don't have. You'll be a capable doctor wherever you end up, but... why not consider Presby?"

What Robby really wanted to ask was: *why not consider me?*

"I've already got an internship lined up, Dr. Robby."

The words came out quick and impersonal, but they hit Michael Robinavitch like bombs. He was, still, quite good at forcing down any reaction his body wanted to make, but his eyebrow twitched, and he cocked his head, with a surprised little smile. "I see," he tried, then paused for a second, swallowing the lump in his throat. "Where at?"

"Mercy Hospital," Dennis nodded. "I applied to a few different places a couple of weeks ago. Before my first day here. Needed to line up a job."

"Of course," Robby agreed, albeit begrudgingly. "No- yeah, that's fantastic. And they've already accepted you?"

"That's what 'lined up' implies," Dennis joked.

"Right."

"...Yeah."

The air between them fell stale for a second. They'd begun to overstay their welcome away from the bustle of the ED.

Breaking the silence, Dennis tried: "I did enjoy it here, Dr. Robby."

They met eyes. Robby looked like he had very little light left in his.

"That's good to hear," he spoke wearily.

Looking around - and nearly squirming by this point - Dennis pointed to the hall behind him and stepped away, saying, "I should... go pick up a patient."

"Whitaker."

The boy stopped. "...Yes, sir?"

"Let me at least send you home with the forms."

Tears put pressure behind Dennis' eyes. He was, this entire time, trying to fight against the urge to take Robby's offer, and the man wasn't making it any easier. Trinity's words echoed in his mind; he knew only bad things could come from staying at Presby, but Robby must've known that, too. Robby probably known even better than Dennis what kind of trouble they risked by continuing their... routine.

This *needed* to be a goodbye.

"I..." Dennis gnawed inside his cheek, looking utterly defeated.

Defeated by love. Defeated by hunger. Defeated by what he'd long ago cursed himself with; an insatiable need for the only thing in the world he could never truly learn to live without.

"Just find me after your shift," Robby practically pleaded. "I won't ask you to come home with me tonight. I'm only asking you to take the forms. And tell me you'll consider it."

"Dr. Robby," Dennis sighed, trying to fight back the emotion as he looked up from the floor.

"I *don't..."* he strained, "want to hear a decision right now," then he winced, shaking his head. "Just take the forms after your shift, Whitaker."

It was spoken almost like a barked order.

But Dennis could hear the unexplainable desperation in the older man's voice.

Six days later, Robby endured what quickly became one of the most grueling day shifts of his life at Presby. Trinity Santos had come to him in the afternoon and confided about her discovery; Dr. Frank Langdon had been stealing drugs from the hospital. And there was no way of knowing how long he'd been doing it. His star student, his golden prodigy who he'd raised up to the position of senior resident much in the same way he'd once raised up Heather Collins. Much in the same way he'd once raised up Samira Mohan.

Much in the same way he'd once raised up Dennis Whitaker.

Robby had left a trail of prodigies in his wake throughout the years, but he *never* imagined he'd have taught a doctor who would do what Frank Langdon had now been caught doing.

He kicked the man out in a dramatic, very public scene in the middle of the hospital, leaving nurses and doctors alike quite confused. Then it was up to *him* to spend the remainder of his shift acting natural. Acting normal. Acting *functional* in the hopes that the ED would not fall apart after losing one of its senior residents so very suddenly.

The shift nearly tore him apart. The isolation nearly tore him apart.

"What're you doin' up here, bud?" Dr. Abbot called out from behind as he approached Robby, who leaned against the railing at the edge of the Presby hospital rooftop.

"Ohhh, you know *me,"* Robby tried to dismiss comedically. "Just stargazing."

"The stars are up there," Abbot pointed up at the sky, which Robby was clearly *not* looking at. "And you got a shit view of them with all this light pollution."

Then, the silver-haired man snorted and added: "That's kinda like us, if you think about it."

"I don't follow," Robby sighed.

"The light pollution. We're surrounded by bright, agitating lights. Makes it tough to see the stars sometimes, hm?"

"Hm," Robby pondered half-heartedly.

"But they're there."

Abbot leaned against the railing, just next to Robby. He minded his distance, but kept close enough *just* in case. He and Robby had had conversations like these on the rooftop countless times over the years. Sometimes Robby was the man looking beyond the edge, sometimes Abbot was.

But in all cases, they kept one another grounded.

"Don't you have patients to torture, Jack?"

"Tryin' to keep you from being the first one, tonight," the man quipped.

Robby allowed himself to smile a little, though it looked pained.

Taking on a more serious approach, Abbot tried: "You've been falling back into old habits this week, my friend."

"You spying on me?"

"If I was any good at that, I'd have taken it up in the second World War and won myself a medal of honor," Abbot joked, busting out into a laugh as he slapped the railing. When he reeled himself in, he continued: "It's not hard to see, Robby."

"That so?"

"Mhm. Smoking every chance you get, eyebags popping out again like you haven't been sleeping, on edge every time we do handover," Abbot listed off each offense. "And that *fuckin'* helmet."

Here we go, Robby mentally prepared himself.

"You were doin' real good in July, I'll give that to you."

"Had to set a good example for my med students," Robby tried to dismiss, like nothing was wrong.

"Oh I believe you, my friend. Had to set a *real* good example."

Robby didn't want to analyze that comment.

Abbot continued, standing upright as he turned away from Pittsburgh and faced Robby, "But if you were only doing it for Javadi and Whitaker, then you weren't *really* doin' any good for yourself, were you?"

Dennis Whitaker's face flashed through Robby's mind like blurry streetlamps.

"Well, the med students weren't the only familiar faces we lost this week," the brown-haired man quipped against his better judgment.

"Langdon?" Abbot surmised.

Robby only nodded, nearly wincing now that he had to openly address *that* wound.

"Flora was yapping a little about it to me down there," Abbot said. "What went wrong?"

"Dr. Santos."

"Your intern?"

Robby nodded. "Tough girl. I had to peel Langdon off her case the other day and... she took it well. All this time I hadn't thought much about it, but," he kissed his teeth, "she was on his trail. Found out he's been stealing meds from us."

"From *Presby?"*

"Yep."

"Yeesh," Abbot hissed. Then he leaned against the rail again, shaking his head. "That's gotta be tough on you, man. I can't imagine."

Robby huffed, then - for the first time during their conversation - turned to face Abbot as he joked, "You giving me permission to keep smoking?"

"Smoking? Sure." Abbot's lips curled downward, and he nodded. "Riding that funny bike of yours without a helmet? ...I dunno, man."

They shared a look. Both men stood firm, unwavering.

After a soft pause, Robby calmly ordered: "Let me dig my own grave, Jack."

"Brother," Jack groaned. "You're already stuck in the trenches. Digging a grave takes more energy than finding the flowers in the mud, my friend."

Robby rolled his eyes and pushed off the rail, grabbing his stethoscope and hooking it back into place around his neck as he began walking toward the door leading back inside Presby.

"I'm serious, man. The flowers are there," Abbot shrugged, unmoving against the rail. "You just gotta reach for 'em."

Robby did not reach for the flowers that night.

Instead, when he escaped Presby and made it to the parking lot, he fastened his helmet to the strap of his backpack as he revved his motorcycle, letting time pass only long enough for him to burn through a cigarette.

After he'd enjoyed that familiar burn in his throat and his lungs, he rumbled out onto the main streets of Pittsburgh. The night air wasn't cool, but the hint of autumn sat upon it like a teasing song as it whistled in his ears and ghosted through his messy brown hair.

He passed the time of the idle drive by assessing Abbot's words. Robby knew he was living a painful life, stuck within his own trenches, but he also knew there were no more flowers to

find. Abbot had meant well, but after everything, Robby had - this past month - failed to cultivate those flowers once again, in the form of Dennis Whitaker.

It wasn't dissimilar to the ways in which he'd failed Heather Collins all those years ago, pushing her aside until the love she was able to give him was only a fragment. It wasn't, perhaps, dissimilar to the ways in which he'd failed Dana Evans, promising the woman he'd keep in contact with her only to never again send another letter upon leaving Franklin, too ashamed of everything that'd happened to confront her.

It was even, perhaps, within the realm of the way in which he failed Frank Langdon, raising a doctor who felt it necessary to steal medicine from a major hospital's very own inventory to fuel his secret addiction.

There were many flowers Michael Robinavitch failed to cultivate during his long, long stay in the trenches.

Too many, in fact, to address in his mind before a car slammed into his motorcycle at the four-way intersection, just a few blocks from his apartment.

Chapter End Notes

I... am so sorry.
Just bear with me here until next Sunday

Notes:

Thank you to everyone who's been so unbelievably kind and supportive of this fic. It's been such a good time getting to know everyone and exploring these characters and putting little pieces of myself into this story and seeing people relate to it. Such a beautiful experience, UGH.

If you'd like to stay up to date on the final two chapters of 'The Overs' as well as the fanfiction's original song, follow me on Twitter right here.

Chapter 13: Lover, You Should've Come Over

Chapter Summary

> An old friend shows up in Pittsburgh while Dennis struggles to navigate a devastating situation.

Chapter Notes

> Chapter 13's song is "Lover, You Should've Come Over" by Jeff Buckley on his 1994 album, "Grace"
>
> Chapter warnings: brief mention of childhood trauma, referenced canon-compliant suicide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The clock ticked away on the wall in the living room behind Dennis.

He'd been sitting at the kitchen counter for nearly two hours scribbling away at the forms for the Presby internship. It'd now been six days since his final shift in the ED, and six days since Robby practically begged him to take the papers and *consider* them. To consider the internship. To consider him.

The part Dennis Whitaker did not want to admit - even to himself - is that he knew quite well - and admittedly, from the jump - he'd choose Presby over Mercy Hospital. He'd just convinced himself to take his time with the decision and find tangible reasons why it was a good idea. So as not to concern Trinity Santos. So as not to come across desperate to Robby.

Why should it matter? Dennis asked himself countless times those last six days.

Perhaps it shouldn't have mattered at all, but alas, for better or for worse, staying at Presby was for, ultimately, one main reason:

Michael Robinavitch.

Dennis just wouldn't admit it aloud, or to himself.

The front door of the apartment squealed open after the lock rattled for a moment, and when Trinity stomped in, Dennis greeted without looking up from his papers: "You're home later than usual."

She did not respond, only walked into the kitchen, dumping her bag in the dining room chair and pacing.

"You're gonna hate me, I think," Dennis admitted with butterflies in his stomach.

"Oh yeah?" Trinity exhaled as she paced, watching as Dennis scribbled away. Watching in distress. "Why's that?"

"I'm going with Presby," he snorted, leaning his head further down to erase a pencil error. "And before you judge me, before you shit-talk it, let me just-" he cleared his throat "-explain. It's a good job. I've really, *actually* enjoyed my time there. I love working under Dr. Mohan, and I love learning from everyone. McKay, you, Dr. Abbot, Javadi and Mel. Hell, even the night shift crew is fun to be around. And if I were to swap to Mercy, I'd be restarting. And it's not like that'd be the very end of the world, gosh no. But it would *suck.* And I *know...* my situation with Dr. Robby hasn't been the most riskless choice I've ever made, but I'll make it clear to him we can't be... anything. We just have to survive with what we've got. And what we've got," Dennis looked up, eyes meeting Trinity's own, "is Presby."

He swallowed, squinting as he scanned her face. She looked very pale. And *anxious.* She picked at her cuticles idly with a clenched jaw. Almost invisible to the eye were her little shudders, but that was what *really* concerned Dennis.

"Trinity, what's wrong?"

"Dennis," she stifled her trembles. "I need you to listen for a sec."

His brows furrowed.

"Robby's at Presby right now," she stated quickly.

"...I don't—"

"—In the ICU."

It was... akin to a gunshot right against the ear. Dennis could hear the ringing drone as its volume swelled and the noise of the outside world muffled under dark water. His heart fell out of his chest with a slam against the bottom of his stomach, knocking the wind from him. He planted his palms on the kitchen counter to keep himself stable, swallowing an impossibly hard lump in his throat.

"Pardon?" He tried in a whisper as thin as paper.

"I was..." she crossed her arms, "just about to clock out when they brought him in. He got in an accident."

"An accident?"

Trinity nodded.

"What kind of—"

"Vehicle crash. A car hit him from the side. Ford Mustang. Tipped his motorcycle and crushed his leg as it slid. There's head trauma." Trinity spoke distantly, like she was simply reciting a patient's ailments. Like it wasn't Robby.

Dennis shuddered, lips parting.

"Head trauma?"

She nodded as though it pained her.

"No," Dennis shook his head. "No, that isn't right. That can't be right. He promised-" a choked sob "-he *promised* he'd wear his..." his eyes searched Trinity's for answers. "Was he wearing a helmet? He was supposed to be wearing—"

"—Whitaker, I have no clue. He didn't come in with one on. I didn't ask. Dr. Shen and Dr. Mohan were there to help. Neuro took him up to the ICU and I didn't hear much after—"

"He can't do that. He can't do that, I... I-" Dennis crumpled the Presby internship papers in his hand and waved them around frantically as he stood from his chair. "I made my choice. I want to be there for him... I chose Presby. This can't happen *now.* After everything."

"It was just a freak accident," she sighed, but there was a kind of empathy in her voice that could not be denied. She felt his pain.

Dennis made haste to his bedroom, grabbing a bag with a kind of urgency that Trinity hadn't seen from him before.

"What're you doing?" Trinity asked from the kitchen.

"I need to see him."

"They won't let you, and you know that. ICU has *rules."*

"They make exceptions."

"You know they won't make any for you, Huckleberry. You're not family," she tried reasoning, but still, Trinity knew the kind of pain he was in. Her words came out soft, even while laced with her typical edge.

Dennis stepped out of his room, sparing no glance at his roommate when he said, "Then I'll wait in the hall."

She couldn't even get a final word in before the door had slammed shut behind Dennis with a creak and a rattle. Trinity leaned into the kitchen counter, crossing her arms and tapping her foot anxiously on the vinyl kitchen floor. She wondered if it was a bad call to tell him so soon.

Dennis tried exactly that.

He tried asking to be let into Robby's room. Even flashed his expired student doctor badge, as though that might sway any opinion. It, of course, did not.

So he waited just outside the room, in a stiff chair under the fluorescent, harsh hospital light. For hours, he sat there twiddling his thumbs, only stopping when sleep took him at around one in the morning. The way in which he slept gave him a nasty crick in the neck when a nurse woke him up, at half past three in the morning.

"Excuse me," she tapped his shoulder politely, but he startled awake. "Sorry," she said with a sweet smile.

"Huh?" He mumbled, sleep coating his voice like a thick syrup.

"I wanted to let you know," she tried, "because you've been waiting out here for hours. Dr. Robinavitch won't be allowed visitors anytime soon, I'm afraid. I just... didn't want you to feel stuck here all night and all day tomorrow waiting to be let in."

"Oh," Dennis licked his lips, voice hoarse, brows knitted. "Sure. Yeah."

"Yeah," she parroted with a nod, then raised an optimistic point: "But, he's stable. He's been unconscious since he came in, and Dr. Lounds says it's possible he *won't* wake up for..." she trailed off, trying to find more optimism, "an extended period."

"Extended period?" Dennis' heart dropped.

"It's hard to say how long he'll be out, and there's always a chance he doesn't wake up. But, Dr. Robinavitch is a strong man. We all hear the work he's been doing down in the ED."

Dennis swallowed.

"Do you..." she spoke carefully, "know him personally?"

Quickly, he glanced down at her badge, reading *Nurse Kim Tate.* Then he looked up and nodded. "He's, uh, my mentor. Well— *was.* He's my attending nowadays. I, uh, work down in the ED. I'm taking an internship here."

"Ah," she smiled, eyebrows raised. "How exciting! Well, then I'm sure you know better than I do how tough he is. A little strength goes a long way in incidents like these."

Nurse Kim was already stepping back, prepared to walk away, when Dennis stood from his chair abruptly, swallowing the lump in his throat before asking with a weak voice: "Nurse Kim?"

She stopped, turned, and smiled. "Hm?"

"Could I ask you a favor?"

She offered a polite little nod.

"Could the hospital, uh, write down my landline number? And... and could you have them call if anything changes? With Robby."

Nurse Kim did not immediately respond. She studied Dennis' face for a second, smile fading, before finally offering another nod and guiding him over to the nurse desk down the hall. He wrote down the landline to Trinity's apartment on a little notepad and handed it over, thanking the woman for her kindness.

Against her better judgment, as Dennis was already walking down the hall to leave Presby, Nurse Kim said, "Sir, I know it may not be my place to say it, but..."

Dennis stopped, turning to face her, waiting for her words. On her face sat an expression like anguish. She looked at the floor now, clipboard hugged to her chest as she found the right words:

"He only had one emergency contact and she hasn't returned any of Presby's calls. I can't imagine what he's going through in his personal life... to have no one else looking out for him." She nodded, "It warms my heart that you are. It really does."

Hearing that was less of a pat on the back and more a punch to the gut. Dennis clenched his jaw, forcing down the little, sour bubble of emotion that threatened to rise up once again in his throat. He eyed the hall behind the nurse, then met her own eyes once more and offered a single, curt nod.

Looking down at the tiled floor, Dennis said, "He's looked after me for a long time, so... it's only fair I do the same."

Dennis spent the next two days tossing and turning in his sleep when the moon shone over the apartment. Whenever the sun rose over Pittsburgh, he was a hermit, rotting under his covers, mind unable to peel away from the mere image of Robby's face. What it might've looked like just before the crash. The fear that must've swam in his pupils. Or perhaps there was no fear.

That would've been a problem.

The pain of wondering such things weighed Dennis down as though he were anchored to the bottom of a river, tormented by the raging current and unable to swim up for air. He did not want to imagine what might've been going through Robby's head, but couldn't hold himself—

"Hey," Trinity called softly from outside his bedroom door with a knock.

"What?" He returned, muffled under his blankets.

"I haven't seen you eat in two whole days," she sighed, resting her forehead against the door just gentle enough that it didn't make a sound. "Let's go out and get some fresh air, hm? Some pizza, too."

"I'm alright," he tried politely, voice hardly audible behind the closed bedroom door and under the covers. "But thank you. Really."

"It wasn't an offer," Trinity clarified. "You gotta get out and get some air. Burying yourself in the apartment isn't serving either of us."

There was a pause of silence as she waited for a response. Then, less muffled though still behind the closed door, Dennis called out, "Give me twenty to shower."

With a fond little smile threatening to creep onto her face, Trinity said, "Hurry up, Huckleberry."

So he took his shower, leaving the water cold as punishment for his inability to stop Robby from his reckless habits. He didn't shy from the icy stream, he deserved it. Old habits died hard, and Dennis was painfully alive right now. He hoped Robby was, too—

"Nope," he hissed under the showerhead, digging a nail into his side to force himself away from those thoughts.

The rest of the shower was a challenge of internal silence, and Dennis almost made it five minutes without his train of thought changing course and barreling straight back into Michael Robinavitch.

When he stepped out, dried, dressed, and headed out of the apartment - with Trinity Santos by his side, watchful the whole way - Dennis led them to the pizza place they'd shared slices at last month. The first place they really got to know one another, he and his roommate. How wrong he was about her; Trinity did have a heart, as heartless as she presented.

And her heart was especially big for those who teetered on the edge of cliffs.

"Thanks," Dennis muttered before chomping into his pepperoni slice.

He sat across from Trinity in the window booth, as they'd become accustomed to doing the handful of times they ate here.

"Yeah," she tipped the glass Cola bottle up, sipping at the sweet soda. When the bottle tapped back onto the thick table, she eyed her roommate, but said nothing.

She wanted him to address the elephant in the room, but that was entirely his decision to make. Trinity wouldn't push a man like Dennis Whitaker to speak about the demons nipping at his insides, lest he cry himself to death right there in front of the pizza cooks.

Sensing her urging stare, Dennis *did,* in fact, speak up:

"I'm doing better," he lied.

"Didn't say you weren't," she shrugged.

"You've got that look in your eyes," he peeled his own eyes away, letting them fall onto his plate before filling the brief silence with another bite of pizza.

Crossing her arms, Trinity leaned back against the booth. "Can you fathom why?"

"'Cause I've been holed up in my room. I know."

"You're simplifying it."

"I'd hate to overcomplicate it."

"Love is complicated, Huckleberry."

He looked up again, tentatively meeting Trinity's eyes, jaw clenching defensively as he tried processing her admittedly undeniable words. Love was *too* complicated, and it had *been* complicated since the day he fell in with Michael Robinavitch, many years ago.

Funnier yet, how deceptive love was; ten years apart lulled Dennis into a sense of control that he never truly had over his heart. It was all just... a *sense* of it. Right up until he wound back in Robby's air.

Trinity leaned forward again, into the table this time as she lowered her voice: "Life can be so... *fucking* hard." Searching very carefully for the right words, her eyes darted around, scanning Dennis' face. "But there are people that can and *want* to help you."

Unable to suppress the silent little shakes, Dennis kissed his teeth, rolling his eyes.

"Dr. Robby wanted to help me," he nodded. "...And look what I did to him."

Realizing now that, on some level, Dennis blamed *himself* for this outcome, Trinity shook her head, scoffing. Her carefully selected words began falling apart as emotion took over:

"What, you think a grown man's decisions are *your* fault?"

"I think that I—"

"—By that logic, *I* put him in the hospital, too. Got his favorite resident kicked out of Presby, after all. You think it's fair to blame me for his choices?"

"No," Dennis clarified quickly.

"Right. So it isn't fair to blame *yourself,* either, Whitaker."

"...But it's more complicated than that. There's so much you couldn't understand about this."

Clenched jaw and balled fist, Trinity decided it was time to open up.

"I understand these things a lot more than you know."

Sensing her vulnerable change of tone, Dennis shrank in his booth across from Trinity.

After a contemplative pause, deciding if she was really about to open up, Trinity said, "I had a best friend, growing up."

The quiver in her voice was nearly impossible to hear, but it weighed on the air between them.

"She meant... *everything* to me. Then came a man."

Dennis' brows furrowed.

"My friend and I went through something pretty vile. That man... he took advantage of our age and I'm sure at least a handful of folks knew it. 'Course, no one would bat an eye. It's a man's world, as you know."

The commotion around them seemed to silence, and Dennis' attention lasered in on each of Trinity's words, stunned by her vulnerability. Stunned that she'd open up to him at all, ever—let alone like *this*.

"Things got so bad that my friend... she, uh," Trinity chewed inside her cheek, "took her own life."

Dennis' lips parted, like he wanted to say something or console Trinity in some way. But words did not come out, and instead, a brief, soft silence hung in the air between them as they looked at one another. A new kind of understanding in their dynamic shone down, like their friendship was forged in more than just luck; it was forged in trauma. A shared bond that neither spoke about, but both - on some level - always recognized in the other.

"Every single day of my life since, I've regretted not being able to stop her," Trinity nodded. "I spent so much time wondering what I could've done to make things go any different. Any *better."*

"That's not fair to you," Dennis finally muttered.

"You're starting to get it a little. It's not fair to carry that pain just because you think you should've done better—or *could've* done better. At the end of the day... all of us make our own choices, sometimes the worst choices we can make. But they're all our own."

"Did it ever get any easier? Trying not to blame yourself for..."

"Whitaker," Trinity sighed. "You *know* Robby didn't try to do that to himself."

"No, but—"

"—Witnesses confirmed it was a freak accident at a four-way intersection. Whatever guilt you're carrying, it's..." she shook her head, "something that's been inside you a lot longer than this."

Blurred images of Tennessee flashed through his mind like a faulty filmstrip. Images of him walking out on Robby ten years ago. Images of their final argument. New light shed upon him, knowing how much pain the man had really been in all those years.

Trinity continued: "This is something that you have to understand isn't your—"

"—But his *helmet."*

Trinity paused, allowing Dennis to grasp at straws.

"He wasn't wearing it when he crashed," Dennis stated, as though that wasn't already known information thanks to Presby's diagnosis.

"...No," she agreed begrudgingly. "He wasn't."

Dennis shuddered.

"He may not have done it to himself," the boy looked up into Trinity's eyes, "but he *chose* not to stop it from happening."

Trinity saw the emotion behind his pupils, like the window to a soul that had known only suffering for the brightest parts of his life. Every glimmer cost a nightmare, every hope cost a dream. And love, it seemed to cost whatever left Dennis Whitaker had to offer.

She did not pity him, she *understood* him.

"There's not a day that goes by I'm not grateful I didn't go through with what my friend did," Trinity added tenderly to her previous point, then shifted back to: "I don't know if I'll ever really understand your *dynamic* with Dr. Robby. He's older than you, and he's your attending, and... that kind of thing is really fucking tough to make work fairly."

Dennis let out a strained sigh, biting down to stifle the emotions bubbling in his throat.

"But..." Trinity began again, "I've seen the worst choices a person can make, Whitaker." She shook her head. "You're not so bad for one another."

"I-"

"Just," she stopped him, eyes closing as she prepared to build her walls back up, *"whatever* happens with him, I need you to promise me you'll look after yourself."

Dennis searched Trinity's eyes which were full of concern and care, like a sister. *Much* like a sister. One he could only dream of having had in Nebraska, where it all began. One who, if she *had* been there for him in Nebraska, might've altered the course of his turbulent life. Might've mellowed it out.

"Promise me you'll do what works for you," she stated again in the silence.

It was, perhaps, the first time in his life Dennis was certain he meant it when he said:

"I promise."

When they returned home that afternoon, the landline was already ringing, vibrating against the wall of their apartment. Dennis hurried over to pick it up, leaving Trinity to catch the front door.

As he'd dreaded, it was Presby. The lady on the phone introduced herself as Nurse Kim and asked if she was speaking to Dennis Whitaker and he confirmed just as quickly, giving her a moment to say that Robby had come to. She said he was moved to Presby's step-down unit for moderate observation, and that they allowed visitors on that floor.

Before she could finish another sentence, Dennis had already dropped the phone, leaving it to sling against the wall as the cord stretched. He bolted toward the front door, nearly tripping as he swung it open.

Trinity didn't need to ask where he was going. She saw the hopeful little grin on his face before he bolted.

The run to Presby had never felt so long, and it was a particularly hot day out, leaving Dennis to weave through busy crowds of students on their apartment's street before he crossed and navigated down several more blocks, all the way to the massive Presby hospital building.

He nearly took Dr. Abbot out as the silver-haired man walked out of the main entrance.

"Woah, woah," the older man chuckled, slinging the strap of his lunchbox over his shoulder. "Whitaker? Good to see you, man. You here for..."

"Dr. Robby," Dennis confirmed. "He's awake?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "I was up there for a few minutes with Dr. Mohan. Came in to bring her a lunch, but the nurses in the ICU came down and broke the good news."

"So he'll be good to go soon? They'll discharge him?"

Dennis waited for Abbot to respond, but that response didn't come. Instead, the man offered a challenging glance and a pained grin.

"Well," Abbot croaked, "he's, uh... as I'm aware, he's not gonna be doing much on his own anytime soon. I don't know when they plan to let him go, but I'd guess it'll be a few weeks."

Dennis could feel his heart sink into his stomach with a loud thud as he squinted, trying to assess what Abbot might've meant. He wasn't sure, but it couldn't have been worse than not waking up at all, which *was* the original concern.

"I oughta get in there and see him while visitor hours are on," he nodded, stepping past Dr. Abbot.

"Yeah, hey-" Abbot called out, turning back to face Dennis "-he's got a visitor right now. Blond lady, real sweetheart."

The boy wasn't really listening though, just nodding as he continued speed-walking into the entryway of Presby, and by the time the doors had closed behind him, Abbot was facing forward again, letting out a sigh.

Dennis ran through the main lobby and crammed himself into the elevator, then pressed the button for the step-down unit, waiting anxiously with a foot tapping against the floor the whole, short way up. The whole while he imagined what he'd say. Apologies, perhaps?

No, he promised Trinity he'd learn from that mistake.

No apologies, so surely, he thought, it was appropriate to instead scold the man for being an idiot.

Maybe not that either.

His contemplation was cut short by the ding of the elevator, and the doors pulled open, leaving a long hallway full of nurses for him to weave through. Dennis stepped quietly through and greeted each stranger in silence as he closed in on the nurse station.

When he stopped at the desk, a woman with dark complexion looked up from her chart. "What can I help you with, sir?"

"Michael Robinavitch? He was moved down here today from the ICU. Is he taking visitors?"

She didn't need to look down at her log to know where the man's room was, it seemed. "Dr. Robinavitch is a little further down the hall in 18E. He's got a visitor already right now, but we allow two at a time, so you're fine as long the volume stays down."

"Thank you ma'am," he nodded, scurrying further down the hall.

What should he say? It freaked him out now that he was so close to speaking with the man he'd mentally established to have been *dead* already. What could he possibly say that'd be of any significance to the admittedly large list of unspoken truths between the two of them? What could Dennis Whitaker say that would matter to Michael Robinavitch?

Once again, he was interrupted from his thoughts as he stood in front of the door to Robby's room, because the door opened, and the woman that walked out was *Dana Evans.*

Her eyes widened just as quickly as his did, and words did not come out before she could close the gap between them, bear-hugging Dennis like a long-lost son. She nearly squeezed the life out of him, and he clung to her, feeling the tears poke behind his eyes, threatening to come out.

"Miss Dana?" He mumbled into her shoulder, nearly shaking now.

"What the hell are you doin' here, baby? How've you been?" She cooed, rubbing his back to sooth whatever shaking had started.

"What- what are-" he stammered, unable to get the words out correctly. "What're *you* doin' here? *How* are you here?"

She pulled back, but held tight to Dennis' biceps as she spoke: "Dunno, kid. I'm that dumbass's emergency contact," she jabbed her thumb at the closed door behind her, referring to Robby.

"What?"

"I'm as confused as you are. I thought the guy had forgotten all about me. Honestly, maybe he *did.* But he put my landline in his records at some point in the last ten years and," she snorted, "I didn't imagine he's been makin' any new friends to care for him, so... I took the first flight to Pittsburgh yesterday morning. Idiot's lucky my address ain't changed."

"You're still in Knoxville?" Dennis asked.

"Been there all this time. Been waitin' for *you* to come visit," she poked, but there was a kind of hurt in her eyes. "But y'never did."

"I..." he shook his head. "I'm so sorry. I went home. Back to Nebraska—right before you left Franklin."

She was already nodding, lips pursed. "I had a feelin' he ran you off for good. Well, *'for good,'* and yet, here you are."

"It's a real long story," he fidgeted.

Finally, Dana offered a little smile, cupping his cheeks in her hands as she whispered, "Well, you better tell me after you go say hi to Dr. Dumbass, alright, kid? I bet he's been wantin' to see you."

Faced with the reality of having to walk through the door sent a wave of fear through Dennis, but he nodded, pulling away from Dana.

"I'll be back in a minute, I gotta piss like a racehorse."

When she barreled down the hall, Dennis took a deep breath in and held it in his lungs. He held it the whole way through the action: opening the door, stepping inside, shutting the door behind him, and walking until he saw his lover just beyond the corner.

The sight alone stole the breath he'd selfishly tried keeping in his lungs. And it drew silent tears from his eyes.

Robby's eyes were already on him, tracking as the boy stepped slowly into the room. A nurse nodded at bedside, but Dennis did not nod back, he just kept stepping forward, eyes locked on the man in the bed. Fresh, white bandages were secured tight around his head and IVs hooked into his arm. His entire left leg was propped on a platform above the bed and

wrapped in a thick cast. His right foot, though wrapped, didn't look near as hurt. Up his forearms and biceps were loose coverings hiding road rash scrapes. He was pale, and his beard was more unkempt than he'd probably have liked.

"Visitor?" The nurse asked.

"...Yes sir," Dennis breathed out, eyes stuck on Robby. "Hey, Dr. Robby," he tried impersonally, wiping a tear with the back of his hand.

"He isn't speaking," the nurse spoke up softly. "He sustained a cerebral contusion and edema. We're lucky he pulled out of the coma so quickly, but speech seems to be lost for now."

There was a deep pit in Dennis' stomach.

"What-" he nearly choked up "-else is present?"

The way Dennis worded the question signaled to the nurse that he was likely a doctor, so he spoke plainly: "He had comminuted tibia and fibula fractures, the motorcycle crushed his left leg. There was extensive soft tissue damage with nerve injury, so our ICU doctors focused on external fixation before casting."

"When'll it heal?"

"It probably *won't.* Not perfectly," the nurse spoke innocently, but his words were like bells of doom, each one coming out like a hammer to the nail of Robby's coffin. "He'll likely have a limp in the long-term. He should consider a cane for balance."

"A cane-" Dennis reached his hand up, pressing the back of it into his mouth to stop the emotion from trying to spill out. "Will his speech return?"

He dreaded asking, but what else was there left to lose?

"That's difficult to say. Neurology estimates we'll know in the first few weeks if he has a real chance at re-establishing it, but beyond that, it's... in the air."

Robby looked at Dennis like he was the moon in the sky. He looked at him like everything was going to be okay. Or at least like he was trying to convince Dennis, with his eyes alone, that everything was going to be okay.

It did not feel, to Dennis, like anything was going to be okay.

A stifled sob betrayed him, and he sniffled while trying - almost frustratedly - to wipe away the tears which continued falling, compromising what little composure he'd mustered before walking into the room a moment ago.

Awkwardly, the nurse stepped away from the bed and passed Dennis, now standing between him and the door to the room. Quietly, the nurse offered, "I'll give you a moment with him."

When the door clicked closed, Dennis shuffled over to the corner, pulling a dinky plastic chair over to the side of the bed and plopping down in it. He held himself upright for only a

moment before slumping forward, burying his eyes in Robby's wrist. The tears were pouring like a rainstorm now.

Every thought to be had about their relationship swarmed his noisy mind, buzzing incessantly as he tried clinging, even now, to the mangled man in the hospital bed. For several minutes longer than anticipated, he sat there, lurched over the bed, crying into Robby's wrist. And the man just let him. There was no protest, and the room itself was peaceful. It was quiet. Not that such a luxury comforted Dennis now.

When he had his fill of it, Dennis leaned back, sitting upright and looking at Robby with his own, red, puffy eyes. A single, nearly-dried tear trail ran down the man's cheek and into his beard.

"Can you hear me?" Dennis whispered with a clamped jaw and shaky voice.

Robby hummed an "Mm" and nodded.

As pain momentarily evolved into anger, Dennis grit his teeth and seethed, albeit quietly:

"You're a fate worse than death, Michael Robinavitch."

Oddly to Dennis, Robby nodded, almost like he *expected* to hear that. Like he expected to accept it.

"You're a selfish man," he continued to bite out. "And a hard-ass. And you're-" he choked "-a fucking *hypocrite."*

Dennis' breaths were heavy and frantic now, lips curled downward as he watched Robby process all his harshest words. The words he'd wanted to throw at the man for years. The words he didn't know still needed to be said.

"You'll take care of anyone but yourself," he judged, with all the love and concern in his heart.

So will you, Robby might've argued, had he been able to form words.

And it would've been true. Dennis was, as was always the case, something akin to Robby in spirit. Or rather, Robby saw much of himself in Dennis. Their unfaltering need to care for others, and their total inability to look inward and care for themselves. It always led to their worst choices. In a way, Robby - all these years - may have been trying inadvertently to cure himself by instead curing Dennis of such habits.

"I'd like nothing more than to hate you," Dennis continued, then paused. "...But love is complicated like that, isn't it?"

He took a beat to wipe more tears away, leaning back in his chair, peeling his eyes away from Robby as if to try one last time to dismiss the man once and for all. As if to give one last attempt at letting go of him.

But Robby wouldn't have that, even in his current state.

With what little strength he could muster, Robby slid his hand out over the edge of the bed, resting his index and middle finger on Dennis' kneecap. That contact, embarrassingly, forced all rational thought from Dennis, and he faced Robby once again, brows furrowed. His eyes were like wet pearls upon Robby's, and his chin quivered, teeth chattering.

"I don't..." he reached his own hand out, placing it over Robby's, admitting a truth he'd always been too afraid to speak: "I *can't* shake you."

Robby's lip twitched. He scanned Dennis' face.

Before the boy could speak any more, the door clicked open from beyond the corner, and he stood from the chair, quietly. Dana walked around that corner just as Robby pulled his hand back to rest on the bed. Seeing the two of them, Dana *and* Dennis, in the same room was an odd wave of nostalgia for Robby. An *intense* wave.

She stopped at the foot of the bed, hip cocking to one side as she crossed her arms.

"My Tennessee boys. Back in the same room again." She chuckled softly with a shake of her head before adding, "must be the second-coming of Jesus Christ himself."

"I was busy scolding him," Dennis spoke humorlessly.

"I think you deserve to sneak in a punch or two, as well, kid," she joked.

Looking over at Robby, who - of *course* - found it funny, Dennis mumbled, "I still might. Haven't decided yet."

The man in the bed probably greatly appreciated Dana's change of tone, although hearing such honest words from Dennis after having been running from them for a decade was nothing short of life-changingly reviving.

He just couldn't verbalize it anymore. At least not for now.

"It *is* kinda like a family reunion," Dennis admitted fondly after he and Dana bickered for a minute. "We're just missing Heather."

Dana snorted and joked: "She ain't missin' us, I'll tell you that much."

"How come?"

"Girl's making it big in Nashville. Almost out of med school already."

"You're in contact with her?" Dennis grinned, eyes lighting up.

Robby loved seeing the light return to his boy's eyes, even if it was only momentarily.

"'Course I am! I ain't Robby. I'm not an *asshat.* She's been working hard these past few years, making a name for herself at Meharry. Even takes the time to come over and visit Adam and the kids in Knoxville every couple of months or so."

"How're Lawrence and Vincent?"

"Law's in school now," Dana beamed. "Vinny's still at General Motors, I hear. They treat him real well, I guess."

They killed what could've been an hour, just catching up and reminiscing on everything, all while keeping Robby in the loop. Nurses floated in and out of the room for the duration, occasionally pushing pain meds, which gave Robby more of a chance to smile when Dana cracked her funnier jokes.

Luckily for him, though, he didn't need any pain meds to endure a smile every time he stole glances at Dennis. The evening sun beamed in from the hospital window behind him, casting a heavenly ray of warm light on his pale skin. He looked like home to Robby. Dennis *was* home to him, in a way.

He felt like the only safe place in the world for Robby.

Robby stayed in Presby's SDU for a little over a week more before being discharged under Dana's care. How he'd managed to do that?

He had cleverly begun to write on paper in lieu of speaking, although he *was* beginning to manage forming simple sounds, which was progress. And it was a fantastic sign that he might actually regain his ability to speak. Not now, certainly, but sometime in the future, if he worked very hard.

With his newfound skills at scribbling horribly onto little notepads or important documents, Robby practically begged Dana to get him out of the hospital under the guise that she'd care for him. Of course, he didn't expect that she'd actually take up the role of caretaker during his recovery period: but she did.

She'd already called Adam the day she landed in Pittsburgh, and now she'd sorted things out at the University of Tennessee's hospital, where she worked—settled effectively all of her vacation days for the year to care for Robby as much as she could.

He got to see the kind of nurse she had become over the decade. She was a skilled woman with a big heart. Or maybe she just had a soft spot for Robby and for Dennis. Either way, she helped Robby maneuver around his suddenly cramped apartment, and she helped administer his medications. She observed him and helped to undress him and bag the large cast on his left leg whenever he needed to bathe.

Now she felt less like a sister and more like a mother to him.

The first few days as Robby's caretaker were a kind of trial and error session. It turned out, caring for Dr. Robinavitch was about as frustrating as one would expect. Even as broken as he was, physically speaking, he still had the spirit of an independent son of a bitch in him. He *wanted* to do things himself—cooking, bathing, moving from the sofa to his bedroom, moving from his bed to the balcony to people-watch.

"Don't you dare try and get off that couch yourself, crazy bastard," Dana would say, tossing her wooden spoon onto a paper plate next to the stove.

She'd also occasionally sneak in a "I'm havin' a glass of your good whiskey," which always made Robby squirm in protest, unable to get up from the couch.

He didn't *actually* care that she indulged a glass or two those first few nights, just liked keeping up appearances; he wasn't normal if he wasn't feigning agitation at his favorite nurse.

One night, about five days into their routine, there was a knock on Robby's front door.

When Dana opened it, cooking apron still secured around her, she greeted curtly, "What can I do for you, ma'am?"

"Hello! This is Dr. Robinavitch's place, yes?"

"Who's askin'?" Dana spoke, almost like a bouncer.

"I'm Dr. Samira Mohan," she smiled politely, balancing on one arm a big dish covered in foil. "We work together at Presby. I worked under him a long time ago at a clinic. It felt-" she gestured to the dish in her hands "-wrong not to at least leave a 'get-well' gift of some kind."

Dana glanced at the dish, then back up at Samira. "You worked in Franklin?"

The doctor's eyes lit up, and she nodded with a grin. "I did. You must've as well, if you know of it, yes?"

A fond little smirk crept onto Dana's face. "Sure did." She paused for a second, then decided - without consulting Robby - to offer: "Why don't you come in a while? I've got dinner on the stove anyway, we can..." she searched for the words, "mash our dishes together and have a proper meal, hm?"

Samira wouldn't decline such an offer, so she stepped into Robby's apartment, taking in the poorly decorated - or rather, *undecorated* - walls and allowed Dana to take the dish from her. They rounded the corner straight into the kitchen, and Dana sat the dish down on the kitchen island before heading just behind the sofa and ruffling Robby's hair.

She leaned down just a tad and said, "We got a friend for dinner tonight, Robby. You better be feelin' social."

"Mhm," he approved, hoping it was Dennis Whitaker.

But it was not Dennis' voice that said: "How've you been doing, Dr. Robinavitch?"

Still, Samira Mohan was a nice surprise. When she rounded to the front of the sofa and eyed him, concern and familiarity in equal measure glinted her eyes. She clasped her hands in front of her all shyly—a far cry from her demeanor at work, where she dominated.

"D-" he tried the consonant a few times, struggling greatly, but managing to mumble the word, "doctor," with a strained nod.

"Miss Mohan, help him to the table, will you?" Dana asked, pulling a pan out of the oven with her mitts on. "We're having beef meatloaf and boiled potatoes. The taters' don't come with butter, though, so I won't feel bad if you pass on 'em."

"I'm just grateful for the food," Samira assured, offering her arm in front of Robby.

He sat his book down on the coffee table—Dana had been making him read words aloud on random pages to help rehabilitate his speech. Samira held firm as he pulled up to his feet, keeping his weight on his right leg.

"Surely you've got crutches, Dr. Robinavitch? A wheelchair?" She strained, hoisting his arm over her shoulder for balance.

"He's got both, and he's too damn stubborn to use them," Dana snorted, pulling the pot of boiled potatoes off the stove.

Robby groaned, swatting dismissively at the woman.

"Gimme more of that attitude and I'll eat your share of dinner, big guy," she jokingly warned with a pointed finger.

Samira managed to navigate him to a seat at the end of his dining table, carefully sitting him down and using a stool under the table to prop his thick-casted left leg up. A minute later, Dana had served up the meatloaf on a big, white serving plate, dumping the little potatoes into a bowl and placing them at the center of the table. When she returned to the kitchen island and peeled back the foil on Samira's dish, an earthy, tangy aroma teased her nose.

"Ooh," she voiced her intrigue with excited eyes, "this smells delicious. What'd you make?"

"It's *supposed* to be sambar-" Samira adjusted Robby's shirt for him, then took her own seat at the table "-but this one's more of a... lentil soup. I hope you don't mind, I added cooked carrots and drumsticks. Tamarind for tanginess," she noted, "but the real fun though is the spices. My mother always put mustard seeds, curry leaves, and a just a *little* jaggery to bring it all together."

Dana smiled. She quite liked how personable Samira Mohan was. She'd scold Robby later - for the millionth time this week - for not having kept in contact over the years and telling her about the woman.

"Sounds delicious."

"It's more of a breakfast thing," Samira added awkwardly, as if it would make any difference to Dana or Robby.

When Dana took her seat at the table, she enjoyed the little break from serving Robby. Samira took up that job since she sat closer, helping to reach for each dish and serve food. Meatloaf slice and potatoes went on the plate, then a few spoons of sambar went into his bowl.

They ate in relative silence at first, only Robby couldn't.

Tremors riddled the man's hand as he tried lifting the spoon from the sambar bowl. So much so that by the time it had reached his mouth, the savory soup had all but splashed off the spoon, leaving little to enjoy.

"Robby," Dana mothered from across the table. "Let Samira help you."

Immediately, the man shook his head. "N-" he struggled, *"no."*

That shame weighed upon him quite visibly in the dim dining room light. Samira tried not to stare, but it *was* odd to see the man she'd looked up to for so many years be reduced to such a form. It was human to ponder such a change in character, but it also squeezed her heart to see his utter disinterest in being helped.

So, he struggled through the rest of the meal, using all his strength to at least not make a mess as he ate, battling against the wretched tremors in his hands.

"He's always been a stubborn son of a bitch," Dana sighed.

Samira offered an amused half-smirk. "I've picked up on that over the years."

"So you worked with him in Franklin, hm?"

"Oh, yes! I was in and out of the clinic a few times as a patient. He and I connected at some point, and around the fall of '62 he reached out with an open position." She sipped sambar from her spoon, then wiped her mouth and continued: "It helped a lot. Gave me great experience to wrap up med school with."

"You didn't meet Dennis Whitaker, did you?" Dana asked passingly.

"I-" Samira chuckled, "did *not* remember meeting him, no. But funny enough, he ended up at Presby last month for an ED rotation. Said he remembered *me.* I felt awful."

"Don't sweat it," Dana sipped at her glass of water. "Kid couldn't have been there much longer before you got there. Robby made sure of that."

That comment should've tensed the air in the room, but it really didn't. Samira seemed to know, generally, what Dana meant. Clearly she'd gotten to know Robby's less charming side at some point, in some capacity.

"I'm sure he did," she glanced at the man, who pretended to pay no mind. "He *almost* ran him off at Presby, too, on Whitaker's first day."

"Ah," Dana cocked her head, one eyebrow raised as she stared. "Some things never change, huh?"

With slack eyelids, Robby offered a wholly unamused look at Dana.

Another week passed, and Dennis had pointedly avoided being in a room *alone* with Robby the whole while. He'd visit the man's depressing apartment under the guise of wanting to catch up with Dana Evans, which wasn't much of a guise anyway; he did so enjoy speaking with her.

But come end of week, she needed to head back to Tennessee, and Dennis could not bring himself to turn away from Michael Robinavitch.

"So you're going?" Trinity leaned against the fridge, watching as Dennis finished cramming what few belongings he had into his bag.

It was the same bag he'd stuffed his things into when she dragged him into her apartment for the first time back in July. Nearly two months ago now. But it felt like a lifetime had passed in those two months.

"Our friend's flight leaves in a few hours," Dennis spoke softly—detached.

"Dr. Robby's got heavy pockets, right?" She half-heartedly protested: "Can't he hire a caretaker?"

"He wouldn't do that if a gun was pointed to his head." Dennis spoke like he wished Robby would, and in truth: he did wish. He wished this unexplainable burden of love did not fall upon his shoulders. He wished Robby would make it easier for him and hire a stranger to care for him so he could leave this all behind once and for all.

But then he'd just worry whether the stranger knew Robby like *he* did.

Dennis gently added, "I'm hoping I'll only be there a few days."

That wording forced a scoff from Trinity. "You don't have to do this if it's not—"

"—I have to," he nodded, zipping up his bag. "And... I don't expect you to fully understand why," Dennis looked up, eyeing Trinity with fond, kind eyes. She was guarded as usual, arms crossed, body still leaned against the fridge to feign nonchalance. But her eyes told a different story.

Avoiding the word 'love,' Trinity made light of the elephant in the room by jabbing: "I know *why,* it's 'cause you're hung up on him."

Dennis chuckled.

"Fate worse than death," he recited, almost under his breath.

They both knew it was far, far more complicated than that. Trinity Santos was an excellent judge of character when she really allowed herself to see a person, and she'd seen many sides of Dennis this summer. She'd seen his smiles and his tears, his dreams and his worst fears come true. Trinity had seen enough to know that 'love' was a rudimentary way to describe his ties to Michael Robinavitch.

Those ties truly lay somewhere near *identity.* Somewhere around *need.* Somewhere in front of or behind *purpose.*

"Well," she sighed.

"Well," he returned.

Trinity pushed herself upright, arms still crossed, eyes still fixated on Dennis'.

"You better not lose yourself," she offered with a sort of finality.

Dennis did not immediately respond.

"Not that you much *could,* anyway," Trinity added, then paused, feeling a wave of sentimentality wash over her as she added: "You'll always be a Huckleberry."

A familiar little smile tugged at his lips.

"Phenytoin orally in the morning, afternoon, and at bedtime, and he'll need refills bi-weekly for a few months, per Dr. Lounds." Dana held up two bottles for Dennis to eyeball as he set his bag down on the sofa next to where Robby sat. She then shook the second bottle, saying, "Diazepam to help if he's havin' trouble stayin' still at night."

"Staying still?" Dennis couldn't help but glance at Robby, who focused intensely on the book in his lap.

"He's got some occasional muscle spasms that'll probably linger for..." she trailed off, but her eyes suggested a *long time.* "There's also-" she sauntered over to Robby's kitchen island, setting down the pill bottles and pointing at the medicine cabinet "-Dramamine and then a buncha' over-the-counters for pain."

Frantically, Dana moved over to the pot on the stove, cursing under her breath as she peered into it and found a burning mess of what might've once been edible. It was certainly not so, now.

"What's for dinner?" Dennis asked, meandering around the living room, soaking in how dreary it all felt.

"Failed attempt at *sambar,"* she grumbled.

"...Sambar?"

"Well," Dana sighed, resting her hands on her hips and giving the pot an offensive glance, "mine was more like a mystery soup. *Dammit*— I'm sorry, kid. Wanted to have a dinner ready for you and Mr. Grumpy by the time I headed out."

"Hey," Dennis soothed, "It's all good. I'll... toss something together for him. You've bent over backward these past few days."

"Yeah, well," she shrugged. "...You do what you gotta do for family."

Family.

That word rang in Robby's ears like stinging guilt as he eavesdropped from the couch. It was *guilt* simply because she still considered him family after ten years of utter silence. Clearly Tennessee memories bound their souls more tightly than he'd imagined. More than he deserved.

"It's, uh," Dennis tried, a little awkwardly, "unfortunate we didn't get to catch up much."

"You've been busy with school. Nobody's holdin' that against you. Least of all anyone in this room," she chuckled. "How's it treatin' you?"

"I'm almost finished," he nodded. "Picked the internship at Presby, so that's lined up for next spring."

Those should've been excited words, but now they were just hollow.

"Yeah, well," Dana walked over to the main hallway toward the entrance of the apartment, slugging a cream-colored tote over her shoulder and grabbing her wheeled suitcase by the handle. "You'll survive it, kid. You always do."

Hardly, he thought.

Dana wheeled her suitcase over to the living room, parking it right in front of Robby and cocking a hip as she looked down, giving him a fond, feisty look.

"You better behave yourself," she spoke light-heartedly at first. Then she squatted down, just in front of the sofa, looking up at Robby with eyes like hot daggers, lowering her voice so that Dennis could not hear from in the kitchen.

"I mean it, Michael Robinavitch. If you still feel the same about that sweet boy as you did in Franklin, you better start takin' this life a little more seriously. 'Cause it's the only one you've got with him."

Robby's jaw clenched, but he nodded. Rather than embarrass himself trying to get a word out, he offered what could've very well been the most sincere look into Dana's eyes that he'd ever

granted. She - so very briefly - saw into his soul, just enough to know that he *was* thankful for all she'd done for him.

"I'll be seeing you around," she spoke at normal volume again, standing at full height again and grabbing her suitcase handle. As she walked back into the kitchen toward the front door of the apartment, she called back, "And you better not change that emergency contact!"

Dennis stifled a single, soft chuckle. Dana gestured with her hand for him to follow her, so he did. Out into the hallway, and then out the front door of the apartment, then down the stairs and out the door of the building, he followed her. The sun had long since begun to set in the sky, leaving them swamped by blue shadows cast upon the front wall of the building.

They walked down the concrete steps and onto the sidewalk, side by side as Dana's suitcase rattled with each crack in the ground. The street itself wasn't busy, but the commotion of Pittsburgh echoed through the world around them even from the furthest corners of the city.

Dana turned to face Dennis, looking at him in a way that she'd never done before. It almost startled him when she went in for a hug, without any warning. She held him there for a long minute before pulling back, wiping a single tear from her cheek as she swam in his eyes.

"You're a strong man, you know that?"

He swallowed. He *needed* to swallow the emotion that bubbled forth from those simple words. That little reminder.

"You listen to me, Dennis Whitaker," she said. "You're never gonna fight a tougher battle than Robby. And it's gonna be a long, *long* battle. But if ever there was a person on this hopeless planet that could finally win it, I'd bet on you."

She choked up a little, something Dennis had never seen from Dana. Something that forced *more* emotion into the lump stuck in his throat.

"If that fight ever gets to be too much," she nodded, "you call me, and I'll come runnin'. You hear me?"

"Yes ma'am," he swallowed hard.

She patted Dennis shoulder, taking in the sight of him one last time. "It's good to see how far you've come, kid."

Dennis nodded, and they shared one more fond look before Dana pulled away.

"Alright, go get him. He's gonna need dinner soon or he'll get cranky," she spoke casually, but Dennis could hear the sniffling of her nose. He could *almost* hear the tears leaving her eyes.

"Of course," he nodded, scurrying away, back up the concrete steps. Wiping a tear of his own, he could not stop himself from turning back and blurting: "Miss Dana?"

His voice echoed in the street. She turned back, stopping her suitcase.

Dennis opened his mouth, but words did not immediately come out. For a moment, he stood in pause, silenced by the lump in his throat. He certainly wanted to say more, but she had a plane to catch.

"It was real good to see you, too," he offered meekly and with a little rural twang, which she'd assumed he'd all but lost over the years.

Seeing that—*hearing* his timid soul from Franklin, Tennessee jump out for a split second forced a touch of a smile onto her lips. She offered one last nod.

Dennis didn't stay any longer, making his way back up to Robby's apartment with haste.

The place was dead quiet save for Robby's occasional page turn from the sofa. Dennis hadn't been alone in a room with Robby in a while, and he wished he could've kept it that way.

He meandered around for a while, refamiliarizing himself with the place, despite having just been toured around and given the rundown of Robby's daily routine by Dana. It wasn't an extensive routine. Robby bathed every other day thanks to the massive cast on his left leg and his general inability to stand upright. He ate twice a day—*hated* breakfast. He spent the majority of his time on the sofa, left leg propped up as he read and tried to sound out words.

That would be the gist of it all.

But for right *now*... Dennis needed to figure out dinner.

"I could... try a soup, or something," he spoke from the kitchen, unwilling to hang near Robby. "Or..." he looked around the kitchen, eyes landing on a little worn leatherbound book with tiny, loose pages sticking out. "I could..."

He walked over, picking up the book, which was no larger than his hand. He examined the front and the back, then flipped through the first few loose pages.

It was a recipe book.

"I could try, uh..." he trailed off, flipping through pages and pages of dishes that were - as he'd very confidently guess - beyond his skillset. "Christ," he groaned.

"Not," Robby spoke hoarsely from the sofa, immediately grabbing Dennis' attention. "Not," he struggled, "h-" and the words tried coming out, but nearly didn't. *"Hungry."*

Dennis rolled his eyes.

"No, you need to eat."

Robby let out a sound akin to protest.

"You need to eat dinner, Robby," the younger man bit out, agitation already festering in his throat.

"No," the older man tried more confidently.

"I won't let you make this difficult on day one—"

Before Dennis could finish, a page slipped out from the book, twirling in its descent until it landed like a snowflake onto the kitchen counter. It would've been an entirely innocent little piece of paper, had it not said atop the page in bold, pen-scribbled letters: *Chicken Pot Pie - For Mr. Whitaker.*

Dennis squinted, ignoring whatever noises Robby half-heartedly threw out from his spot on the sofa. Leaning down, Dennis examined the page closer. It was torn on one end, like it'd been ripped from a journal of some kind.

He ran his fingers over the handwriting. Little divots in the paper from the pen that had made its marks. It was a detailed recipe of the very chicken pot pie that Robby had made for Dennis so often in Franklin. The pot pie that he'd always passed off as casual. The pot pie that he swore was just 'a dish he'd made too much of to eat himself.'

It seemed Robby meant it when he said he'd saved the recipe after all these years. But it wasn't just saved, and it wasn't *just* a recipe, it seemed.

It was... always for Dennis alone.

The title - and he scanned it over and over again just to be sure his eyes weren't playing tricks - clearly stated: *'For Mr. Whitaker.'* The date atop the page on the outer corner read *September 1960.*

They'd only just met by then.

The world beneath Dennis' feet seemed to thin out until it was nothing but clouds, and he fell through them so gently. It was a silent realization, but one that demanded him to reassess everything he'd ever known about his relationship with Robby. And it forced him to do so right there in the man's kitchen.

All this time, even since their very first encounters, Robby had been doing these things for Dennis. Exclusively for Dennis. It begged dangerous questions.

He wondered, *what was it all for?*

He wondered, *was this of pity or of love?*

And he wondered, *If the latter, Michael Robinavitch, then have you loved me all this time?*

The answer didn't hide itself, either: when Dennis flipped the little page over, another full side of Robby's writing faced him. The entire page was scribbled into with his horrible handwriting, reading:

August 13, 1962

Dennis Whitaker,

I wish I hadn't pushed you to the ground on Friday. Dana having walked out frightened me. I did not want her to see us. This hurts me deeply, and I shudder to think how it hurt you. My fears lead me to pushing you away, because I fear I'll hurt you beyond repair. I fear the world will hurt you and I.

Of course, I've been no good at making these feelings clear to you, so now I'll write them down, ready to read them aloud to you next time you stay afterhours at the clinic. Next time we share a moment alone together, where I feel safest. When I've got you to myself, I will address the thought that would require a million words. The confession that would require all my life to make you truly understand.

It's a confession that I could cut short simply by screaming aloud that I love you.

But that would only be the very simplest beginning of it.

What came next would be a lifetime together. Sharing a bed. Hiding away in the winter when it's cold, that I might find an excuse to warm you up by a fire with your favorite foods at the ready. We'd find a forest all to ourselves in the summer, yelling at the top of our lungs as we stick to one another under the hot sun laying on riverbanks. I'd make love to you in the fall when all else seems bleak amidst the decaying Tennessee tree-lines, the ones you always love to stare at when you've got idle time. I'd hold you in my arms as we soak in spring showers when yet another silent winter has passed us by.

I want you to watch me grow old this way. We'd do it again, every year, like real lovers do. We'd lay to rest only after plucking every cord of love in our bodies. After having grown our branches as far as they'd reach, together. This is the love I crave from you. It's the life I'd like to have. You are the cure to a sickness that has coursed in my heart for only as long as I haven't had you.

You know the man I am, and I know the man you are. We save lives, none more desperately than our own. But each day, those lives wear down on us, and when you one day dive into the world of medicine, you'll begin to share that same darkness. I want to shield you from it. I want to be there for you when the days are long and the clouds are thick. I'd like to be the air in your lungs. I'd like to be the net to catch you, because I've lived this all before, and I want you to live it better.

I know you need me. I know you needed me. I've known since the day you woke up in my tub, flushed and overheated. I only know it because I needed you too. I need you too.

I'm not sure I'd live so good a life anymore without you. The baggage I carry is only made lighter when you're with me. The night above me gives way only to your stars. The water only leaves my lungs when you kiss me. The chill under my skin only settles with your body on mine. You're the wind that shoves me away from the cliff's edge. You are what keeps me alive, and I did not know it, or accept it. Not soon enough.

I love you so desperately. I need you so terribly.

Selfishly, I pray you afford me a fraction of this love I do not deserve in return.

Dennis stood paralyzed, hand gripping the edge of the kitchen counter to keep from keeling over. He trembled, teeth gritting against one another. There was no escape from the tears behind his eyes, so to save himself the embarrassment, he spoke to Robby without turning around:

"We'll-" he nearly choked "-figure out dinner in a minute. I need to use the restroom."

He slipped the little page back into the book with all the other pages, closing it and sticking it back in its corner. Then Dennis bolted for the bathroom without so much as glancing to see if Robby had turned around and seen him. He probably didn't.

Dennis locked the door, then stood leaning in front of the mirror above the sink, simply *looking* at himself.

He wasn't sure what kind of man he saw looking back at him, but it was difficult, given his vision was utterly distorted by the unceasing flow of decades-old tears.

Dennis gave himself a little longer to compose himself, then he splashed cold water in his face, braving the kitchen again and showing an immensely improved amount of patience to Robby. Through single-word responses, Robby managed to convey enough that Dennis was able to make a dinner they both enjoyed.

Having decided not to force the man off the sofa and to the dining table, Dennis brought dinner to *him.* They ate in the living room, pretending like old friends that there was no significance to sharing such a silence with one another.

But one stole glances at the other any chance they got.

"I'll get the bath running," Dennis said, having finished washing their plates off in the sink.

"No," Robby sighed like he was tired of struggling to move around. "T-" he stuttered a few times before getting out the word *"tomorrow."*

Dennis couldn't bring himself to argue that night, not after what he'd read. Not when finally - after over a decade - he *truly* knew what was going on in Michael Robinavitch's head.

"...Okay," he resigned sweetly in what was almost a whisper.

After having given his meds, Dennis fell asleep on the sofa that night, head in Robby's lap as the older man read from his book, occasionally trying to sound out words, newfound determination fueled by the company he now had.

He, too, fell asleep at some point, and they began their first full day together the next morning. It was a simple day, and Dennis - to Robby's amusement - stuck around him the whole day, never really leaving his sight for more than a moment.

In the afternoon, Dennis pulled 'Principles of Internal Medicine' from his bag, perhaps as a show of affection. Robby saw the book—*recognized* it as his own from a decade ago. Realized that Dennis had held onto it all this time.

They did not address that, though. It just hung in the air like one sweet note in a melody.

When, once again, the sun had set over the windows of the glass sliding door leading out to the balcony from the living room, Dennis stretched, standing up from the couch.

"Alright, you need to bathe tonight."

Robby did not protest, only nodded.

They struggled into the bathroom together and Dennis undressed Robby until he was bare. They waited until the water ran hot, then Dennis sheathed the man's massive cast with plastic and helped him into the tub, leaving his left leg out and elevated as much as possible.

He washed Robby's hair first. Then washed his body as best he could. Robby, really, could've done some of that himself, but Dennis took charge. Dennis did it instead, for whatever reason, caring in full for the man.

As he scrubbed his shoulders, Robby let out a noise almost like a chuckle.

Robby tried, "F-" and stumbled the consonant a few times before succeeding "-funny."

Dennis softly cooed, "What's funny?" He continued to scrub, soothing Robby's skin with water he'd cup in his hands and pour over as he washed the suds away.

"This," Robby tapped the tub. "Was..." determined, he struggled the words out, "you."

Realizing immediately what Robby was referring to, Dennis stopped the ministrations of his soap-covered hand, brows furrowing. He swallowed, looking down at the tub, which looked so strikingly like the tub he'd met Robby for the first time in.

The one in Franklin, that Robby had used to save Dennis from heat exhaustion. The very tub that set this whole ride in motion.

Everything had come full circle, and Robby had just pointed it out. He was *right,* too. Dennis now cared for him in the same way that Robby did all those years ago. Dennis felt it was finally his turn to be the one that saved the other.

And perhaps, in doing so, Dennis was saving himself, too.

"You saved my life that day, y'know?" He whispered, continuing his scrubbing idly. "Changed everything." Dennis allowed a smile, hardly visible, to creep onto the corner of his lips.

The only thing Robby said in response was, "Mine."

Dennis' brows knitted together. He wasn't really sure what Robby meant. The one-word responses were, for the most part, effectively communicated. This, however, was a little more difficult to interpret, as desperately as he wanted to.

Seeing the soft confusion on Dennis' face, Robby repeated more confidently:

"Mine."

"Yours?"

Robby pulled his hand out of the water with newfound strength, reaching up and cupping Dennis' cheek, swimming in his tired, familiar eyes. His thumb rubbed little crescents just over the younger man's pronounced eyebags, like he could wipe the decades-long fatigue of love from Dennis' skin.

"Mine."

Chapter End Notes

I want to (very seriously today) thank you all so immensely for reading along with this story.

It's been such an honor to feel like I'm in a safe space to share this thing piece of myself that I've been wanting to create for over a year now, and to have been able to do it in this way where so many of you resonate with it and relate to it and understand it... is one of the most beautiful gifts I've been given in recent years.

I do need to reiterate that I love these characters, and will continue to staunchly see them only as their characters. They live in my little bubble inside of 'The Overs'. <3

And with that said... The Overs is... well, almost over! One more chapter to go.

Until then, look forward to my official song for the fanfiction, which comes out Wednesday!

-

Post-chapter art sharing:

@moontilts beautifully drew a scene from chapter 13!

Chapter 14: The Overs

Chapter Summary

"The one who found a cure for Michael Robinavitch."

Chapter Notes

Chapter 14's song is "The Overs" inspired by the fanfiction.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nashville, 1979

Michael Robinavitch, most of the time, didn't believe he deserved a life as kind as the one he now lived. He'd die before sitting down and spilling his innermost troubles to a professional, but he made up for that with fleeting social honesty among colleagues.

And old friends.

"It's a little strange to see you like this," he spoke *especially* honestly to Dr. Heather Collins, who sat across from him at the desk in her charming, cozy office full of stuffed bookshelves, vibrant potted plants, and earthy-brown walls.

The woman crossed her arms and snorted. "It's a little strange to see *you* at all."

"Writing letters was getting a bit tiring," Robby quipped.

"Dennis Whitaker doesn't seem to mind writing to me," she remarked. "And he's been doing it for *years."*

"Oh, I'm aware."

Dennis had taken Dana's emergency Pittsburgh visit as an opportunity to keep in contact with his Franklin family, but it took him years to convince Robby to do the same, for Dana *and* for Heather. Even then, Robby was a horrendous pen pal on his own.

Through scarcely exchanged letters, Dennis and Robby learned that Heather Collins made it through medical school and multiple years of residency, taking up the role of a clinical instructor and physician at Meharry Medical College in Nashville.

She'd become a formidable face in the medical landscape of Tennessee, focusing her efforts equally on doctoring and teaching the *next* generation of faces who shared stories like her own.

"You've been very busy," he wore a polite smile, fidgeting with his cane where it rested on the arm of his chair. "It's been... what? Twelve years now?"

"You knew where I was," she nodded. "Could've reached out anytime."

"I do apologize," he spoke with sincerity. Then, softly, he added: "I was busy in the trenches."

Heather kissed her teeth. She crossed one leg over the other, leaning back in her chair as she eyed the man. *He had a cane now*—she'd certainly bring that up. He looked a little weathered, older than the last time they'd seen one another. The man's voice also possessed a very subtle but constant shake now.

But most noticeably, there was a distinct *lack* of darkness behind his eyes.

"You've been stuck in those trenches for a long, long time. Longer than you like to admit," Heather reminded. "But," she shifted gears, adopting a more caring tone, "...I hope you've started finding your way out?"

He thought of Dennis Whitaker as he nodded, without skipping a beat. "Trying."

"Not without-" Heather gestured to Robby's cane "-picking up some wounds along the way, I see."

Robby looked down at the cane like he'd forgotten it was there, then looked back up at Heather. "It's just for a little help with balance," he disregarded. "I was in an accident a few years ago."

Unsurprised, Heather said, "Must've been serious."

Robby looked down, digging a nail into his right hand in attempt to stop the subtle tremors. "It set me back a bit, is all. Whitaker actually... he looked after me while I was recovering. Dana, too, for the first few weeks. Surely she told you?"

Heather shook her head. "Of course she did. I just liked to see if *you'd* admit as much to me face-to-face."

"Ah."

A fond smile threatened Heather's otherwise stoic expression. "How *is* Dennis Whitaker?"

"Doesn't he write you?"

Heather shrugged. "I think you rubbed off on him: he seldom opens up about his personal life. I almost wonder if he *has* one."

Robby knew. He just felt the need to *act* as though he didn't.

"He's alright, I imagine," Robby finally answered, guarded. "We c-" the word caught in his throat for a split second as a tremor shook through "-catch up sometimes. He still lives in Pittsburgh."

Heather found it almost amusing that Robby *still* - as it seemed - wanted to believe she was unaware of his fondness for that boy. As though she hadn't fallen in love with Robby *herself* at one point, knowing every secret the man's heart whispered—how it'd always thumped a little louder when he spoke of Dennis Whitaker.

Sensing her oddly perceptive reaction, Robby fidgeted for only a moment more before changing the subject entirely:

"I'm in Nashville because I," he sighed, rubbing the back of his head, "wanted to ask for your help."

"Ah, I see. Have you forgotten how to suture? Came all this way to ask *me* rather than embarrass yourself in front of your colleagues?" She joked with the kind of sarcasm Robby was used to dishing out. Only *he* would know she was joking.

And he did. He chuckled.

"My lunch is," Heather checked her watch, "twenty minutes more. I've got a class to teach at two-thirty."

Straight to the point to respect her time, Robby said, "As you know, ABMS rejected the request for Emergency Medicine to be recognized as a specialty in our field."

"Three *years* ago. In '76," Heather squinted.

Robby nodded, covering one hand over the other for a moment to still the tremor that shook through it.

"What? You'd like me to override that decision?" She asked facetiously.

"You've still got jokes, Heather Collins," Robby grinned. "I wish either of us had that power."

"It would simplify a lot, I'm sure," she agreed.

"*But..."* Robby's eyebrows raised like he had a proposition. "You're a very well-respected physician in Internal Medicine."

"And you're the renowned medical director of Presbyterian-University Hospital in Pittsburgh. Are we measuring titles, Robby?"

"Yours'll be fancier than mine before too much longer," he stated. "But— yes. More importantly, I'm recently part of a board of physicians looking to push to get Emergency Medicine approved, and our new angle," he nodded his head side to side anxiously, "needs us to involve ourselves with other departments."

"You aim to... *attach* yourselves," Collins surmised. "To coalesce."

"If we're partnered with Internal Medicine, among other boards that'll have us, the push for recognition *would* be much harder for ABMS to ignore."

"I should've known you didn't fly all the way down here just to see me," Heather teased. "Is my seat more interesting to you than our revivable friendship?"

"Oh, come now, doctor," he quipped. "I've never been terribly good at friendships."

"I'm *acutely* aware," she smiled fondly, though she *did* mean that. "But in all seriousness, Robby... I don't know. If they rejected the first proposition, what *exactly* could Emergency Medicine offer that would convince ABMS to rethink their decision?"

Robby did not immediately respond.

Waiting for his response, which still hadn't come, Heather added: "Not at all to dissent. I only — I *imagine* it's a waste of time and resources on your end to chase a dream like this any further if it isn't plausible by its second go-around."

"With all due respect to our colleagues alike, Dr. Collins," Robby frowned. "You and I know far better than most how much the country needs a department like this. America's in deep, deep shit. And we've seen that with our own eyes. We both know what the clinic wanted— *needed* to be."

"Franklin," she muttered as though the mere thought of it washed everything else away, if only momentarily.

Robby nodded.

After a pause, Heather raised her eyebrows. "Seems like a lifetime ago."

"By now, it w-" a tremor stopped him for a second *"-was."*

A light flashed behind Collins' eyes. She imagined what might've become of her, or her brother Lawrence, if not for the clinic all those years ago. Robby's quick thinking, the experience with trauma patients, the flexibility. *Utter* flexibility within a medical space.

At the time, it was a wholly unorthodox means of local medical practice, and even she knew that, with her previously limited view of the medical landscape. But what they'd managed to accomplish at the Robinavitch Health Center were miracles. They'd saved lives that hospitals wouldn't dare try to save. She'd witnessed Robby sprinting along decisions that most wouldn't dare tread.

That was the dream of Emergency Medicine. That was, Heather hoped, what Robby wanted to convince her to support.

And how could she not?

"I suppose we *should* want to leave the country a little better than we found it." Heather asked, "I assume you're not in Nashville for very long?"

"Just for the day," he offered a fond smile.

"Give..." she hesitated only momentarily before steeling herself. "Give me an address to send the letter to-" she raised a finger *"-if* I'm able to convince the board."

He didn't react visibly, but Robby's heart danced behind his ribs.

It was, of course, a treat to see Heather Collins after years of having little clue what she was up to, but equally important was her ability to persuade the Board of Internal Medicine. The fight against stress and overwhelm in Presby's ED had only gotten significantly worse over the last seven years, and though Robby hadn't worked directly on the floor of the ED in that time, he now *managed* it.

"P-" he struggled through a tremor, then played it off by clearing his throat "-pen?"

Heather pulled open the drawer on her side of the desk, taking out a shining Montblanc pen and handing it to Robby. She leaned back in her chair, arms folding as she watched him set his pocket-sized notebook on the desk and lean forward.

He wrote slow, and his right hand shook with tremors every few seconds, forcing a frown from him as he concentrated. It didn't help that he could feel Heather's observant eyes upon him. When he finished, Robby gently tore the page, sliding it over.

Heather peeled it off the desk, pinching it between her fingers and squinting at horrendous, nearly illegible handwriting.

Seeing her strain to read it, Robby swallowed. He felt a wave of insecurity bubble through his chest, like he hated being seen for his weaknesses. There was only person he'd become comfortable showing his faults to, and it was not Heather Collins.

"I can't imagine the work you had to put in to recover," she spoke cautiously, but tenderly.

Robby's jaw tensed. "...Today's just an off day. You should've seen me in the beginning. Couldn't even form full sentences for the first few months."

"That must be *very* difficult for a smart-aleck."

The man chuckled softly. "Oh, yes."

"How did you survive it?" Heather's tone was teasing, but there was a sincerity in her eyes like she really was curious.

Robby took a breath and said, "Finally learned to lean on people a little bit."

Heather paused for a beat, letting a genuine, warm smile onto her face.

She still had a lot of respect for Robby despite his many shortcomings, which she'd become intimately familiar with in the 1960s. Hearing - from his own mouth - that he'd finally begun to allow others to help *him* was a nice development. A step in the right direction.

A shame that it only took so many years and so many more mistakes to get there.

"Are you... quite happy in Pittsburgh?"

Robby looked up, unable to entirely suppress the light in his eyes. "I am," he nodded. "Very much so."

"Is *he* happy?" Heather asked perceptively.

Robby stared for a second. He didn't need to ask who she meant.

The tremors in his right hand picked up pace, then completely stopped for a moment, and his heart began to beat a little louder in his chest. "I..." he settled his eyes onto Heather's. Softly but guardedly, he said, "I certainly hope he is."

That was enough for Heather Collins.

She let her smile speak for the relief in her heart. She'd always carried a piece of Dennis Whitaker with her, even having not seen him for almost twenty years. He was the kindest soul on that side of Franklin, and she always wondered where he might end up.

"The one who found a cure for Michael Robinavitch," she mused.

Deflecting the swell of emotion, Robby spoke objectively and without conviction, "It might've been you, at one point."

"Sure," Heather pondered, smile still firm on her face. "I *did* love you. And I'm certain you loved me."

She paused, inhaling, then exhaling. In the sweetest, most familiar voice, she said:

"But the love you and I had was a dive in the pond. What you've got now... it's the very air you swim up for. Maybe it always was."

Robby took his lonely flight home to Pittsburgh, landing late in the night.

He tipped the taxi driver generously when they arrived at his apartment building. Plucking his glasses from his face and stuffing his journal back into his bag, Robby stepped out and into the unusually cold January night, leaning on his cane when necessary. He tugged his sherpa especially tight over his white button-down, holding tight to his day-bag as he hooked his black frames with his finger.

Inside the building, familiar, home-like heat enveloped him, and he took the elevator up to his floor, rubbing his forehead the whole way up. He was lucky the pounding in his skull was *only* a headache.

Migraines had become a pretty normal disruption in his life since the motorcycle crash.

When Robby made it into his apartment, he shut the door behind him quietly, locking it and slugging his bag and cane onto the floor. He left it there, lazily, as he limped into his kitchen, setting his reading glasses down and leaning himself into the island counter, eyeing the birthday card he'd yet to sign as it rested there.

Robby rubbed his palms over his face, up and down as he groaned his futile protest against the stress and the body-aches.

When he had his fill of grumbling, the man plucked a schmear and smoked salmon bagel from his fridge. It'd been sitting there since the prior morning, but Robby did not mind. He couldn't be bothered to cook anything, especially not so late.

After downing two Tylenol pills, Robby crumbled onto his couch, splaying his legs out, bagel in one hand as the other rubbed soothing circles into his aching left thigh. He hadn't even taken off his sherpa, just unbuckled the belt of his jeans, pulled his tucked dress shirt out, and loosened the tie at his collar.

His Sony Trinitron TV, in all its sharp, colorful glory, bored him half to death as he surfed channels.

"-With the coldest temps we've seen in almost a *hundred* years-" Robby changed the channel "-John N. Mitchell is officially on parole after serving nineteen months for his hand in the Watergate-" Robby changed the channel again "-Super Bowl Sunday is just two days away, folks-" he tried another channel "-Soviet Union testing new nuclear technology-" Robby tried one more channel "-Following, of course, the tragic Kent State Protest Shootings in Ohio, the-"

With a click of the remote, the TV blinked as it powered down. The news didn't need to tell him that the world was on fire; he saw it with his own eyes every day.

Robby finished his bagel in silence, eyes focusing on the red book sitting innocently on his coffee table just a few feet from him. *Principles of Internal Medicine.*

The book had gotten very old, unopened for years at this point. But still, it always sat there, like decoration. Or a reminder. It soothed him, in a way.

Wiping the last of the bagel from his lips with the back of his hand, Robby peeled himself off of the couch, hitching back over to the kitchen island and grabbing the pen which sat atop the little cream-colored card.

Robby scribbled a message and signed his name, just below where Dennis had done the same.

Quietly, Robby limped through his bedroom and into the bathroom, closing the door softly and stripping bare. Showering wasn't near as much a struggle now as it had been the first year after his crash. He'd even had the shower renovated into a walk-in with a fancy little bench,

which he now habitually sat in while allowing scalding hot water to beat down over his body —it was great for his left leg.

He sat there for several minutes under the stream of water before actually washing his body and his hair. When he stepped out, Robby stopped in front of the big mirror just above the sink, examining himself.

Over the years, he'd developed a bit of a stomach, as could be expected from a man who, when possible, avoided walking and straining his leg. His beard was well kept, though not by his own doing. Small scars littered his chest under the dark hair there, like reminders of his own idiocy.

When Robby had his fill of self-inflicted judgment upon his appearance, he dried himself off from head to toe and brushed his teeth.

He then limped back out into the bedroom, stumbling in the darkness as he hugged the wall all the way to his dresser, quietly as he could. He opened the drawer and pulled out a pair of his favorite plaid boxers, slipping them on before finding his side of the bed.

Glimmering faintly under the moonlight pouring through the window was a gold cross necklace, laid out neatly just beside Robby's own silver Star of David atop his nightstand.

Robby peeled the covers back gently, just enough to slip under them as he shuffled himself into the bed as carefully as he could. It wasn't enough, though, and it almost never was, given his leg: the other warm body under those covers was already humming back to life.

Dennis shifted, skin ghosting against soft bedsheets as he mumbled:

"Is it time to get up?"

Robby whispered a gentle apology as he closed the space between them, spooning the younger man from behind, stomach flush against Dennis' backside.

"Not even close," Robby kissed behind the shell of Dennis' ear. "More sleep for you."

For a while, they remained still, basking in the sudden heat of such close contact. It starkly contrasted the recent weather in Pittsburgh. It had been a cold winter, which, of course, meant Robby ached more than usual; he'd enjoy any heat he could find.

After a moment longer, Dennis shifted himself in the bed, turning to face Robby, whose features were hardly visible save for the diffused, silvery light of the moon trickling in from the window and settling on his eyes.

Robby inched himself closer, adjusting his head on the pillow until he was close enough that Dennis could feel breath on skin. The younger man shimmied his hand from under the covers and ran his fingers over Robby's beard.

"How was Nashville?"

"Familiar."

"And Heather?" Dennis asked groggily, voice hoarse with sleep.

Robby stole a quick but greedy little kiss from his lover's lips. As he pulled away, he felt Dennis try pushing closer, chasing the kiss lazily. The man reached his hand up and tangled his fingers in Dennis' short, curly mullet. He rubbed soothing circles into scalp with his digits, drinking in the faint whistles of breath coming in and out of Dennis' nose.

"You'd have loved to see her. She's doing great. Even convinced her to write to ABMS. We'll have to send her a thank-you card, sometime, hm?"

Dennis leaned in and stole a kiss of his own this time, pulling back only to show Robby that he was smiling to hear that news.

"You should write somethin' sweet in Dana's birthday card," Dennis reminded.

"Did that before I showered," Robby gloated.

"And I *only* had to ask twice this time," Dennis bantered, voice still thick with sleep.

Robby stole one more kiss and said teasingly, "I'm getting *g-″* a little tremor "-good at this, aren't I?"

Dennis nuzzled closer, throwing his arm over Robby and asking, "How'd you do, today?"

"No migraine. Headache was manageable."

"Tremors?"

"Same old."

"And your leg?"

"Hey," Robby cooed soothingly. "I'm alright."

Dennis buried into the crook of Robby's neck. "Just checking."

"I've got my own *doctor* looking after me," Robby reminded, then trailed his hand down from Dennis' hair, rubbing the younger man's back and pressing kisses into the crown of his head. "Not going anywhere."

Dennis swallowed a lump trying to form in his throat. With a subtle little shake in his voice, he clutched at Robby's back, muttering almost guiltily into the hot skin of the man's neck: "One more time. Please."

Robby let out a chuckle as soft and quiet as Tennessee snow. It tickled the crown of Dennis' head. They clung impossibly close to one another, body heat melting them together under the covers like they'd never need to separate.

Once more, with conviction like man's first vow to God, Robby said,

"I'm not going anywhere, Dennis."

Chapter End Notes

What a journey this has been. I've been doing this thing for the last 3 winters now where I will spend the colder months of the year writing a story and sharing it alongside a song (or a handful of songs) because it's just… my way of living and creating, I guess.

But with this story, it was the first time I tapped into something very, very personal to me, and it was the first time I've ever spent so much time and effort to make it the kind of story that I needed when I was growing into my own identity. The kind of story that I'd be proud to hand off to others as a way of saying, "get out there and live, despite it all."

That experience alone (with all the music I discovered and the history I learned about) made this such a beautiful adventure, but it could never have been made any more beautiful than by sharing it with you guys.

You've been such an intuitive, loving, passionate community of readers to me, and I can't ever thank you enough for that kindness. For spending the last three months with me, or spending any time at all on this story and making it to this point, I genuinely hope you know how grateful I am.

It's a little more sad to me than usual that this fic is over now, but, I guess if the story has taught me anything as I wrote it, it's that there is no singular, grand or dreadful finale. Life is a series of potentials and endings which always leave room for a new beginning. 'The overs' are as survivable as anything else we'll experience, just a little more bitter before their sweetness.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!